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# OKOBORE HIME

## TO

# ENTAKU NO KISHI

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*The Leftover Princess and the Knights of the Round*

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*Book II: A Queen's Conditions*

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Story by: Riine Ishida

Art by: Ichiko Okiya

**Characters:**



**Leticia**

“Leftover Princess”

First Princess of Sommevesle, heir to the throne

Already knew that she would be the next queen



**Duke Barchet**

Knight of Sixth Rank of the Royal Chivalric Order

Rumored to have the best skills within the Order

The receiving end of Leti's high-handed invitation



**Leonhardt**

Leti's younger brother

Third Prince of the Kingdom of Sommevesle

An eccentric historian

**Friedhelm**

First Prince of the Kingdom of Sommevesle  
Leti's eldest half brother  
A prince of charm and charisma

**Guido**

Second Prince of the Kingdom of Sommevesle  
Leti's second oldest half brother  
A Prime Minister-type of prince with his detailed planning and organized executions

**Astrid Gale**

Knight of Tenth Rank of the Royal Chivalric Order  
Duke's junior

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**Credits:**

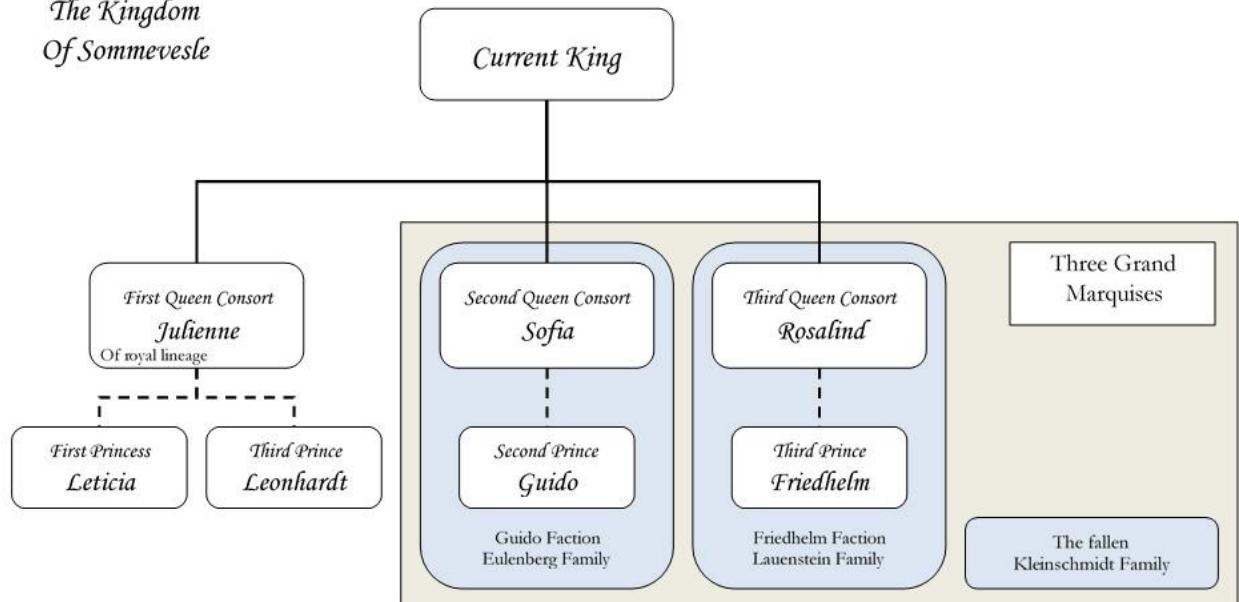
- ❖ Raws: Icarus Bride
- ❖ Translation: Crystal Hikari
- ❖ Proofreading: Scylla
- ❖ Quality Checking: Mizuouji

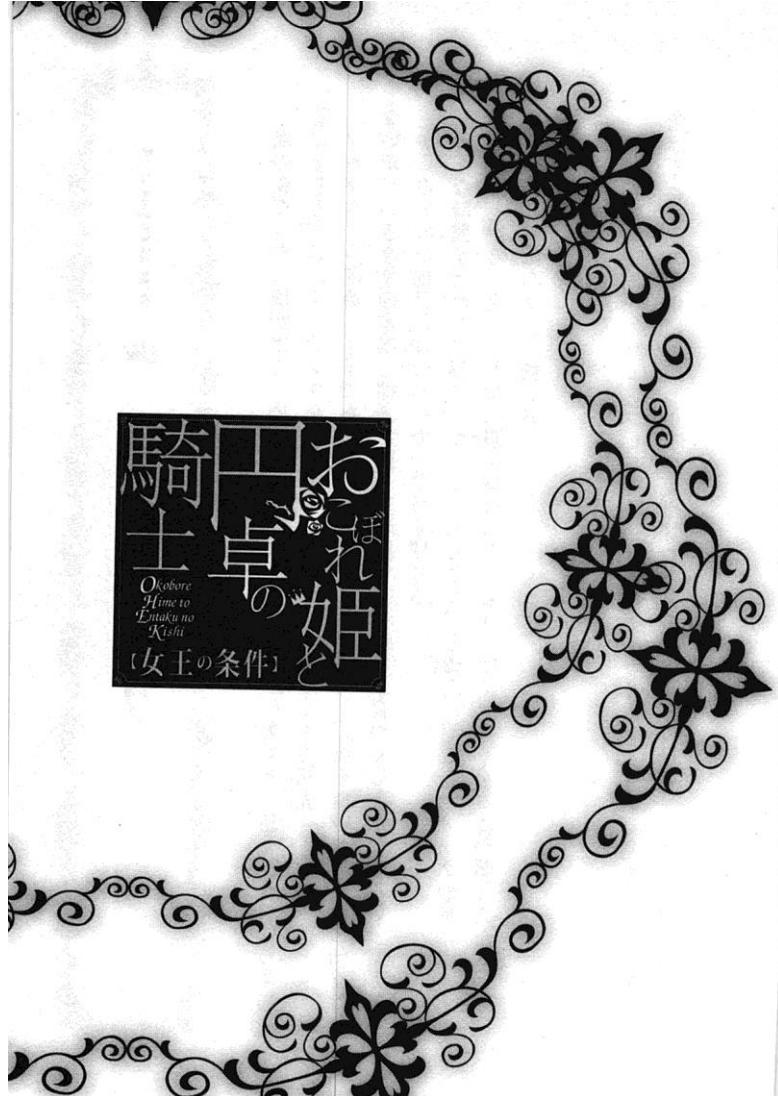
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Thoughts are signified by '*italics*'.

*The Kingdom  
Of Sommevesle*





騎士の姫  
おぼれの姫  
*Okobore  
Hime to  
Entaku no  
Kishi*  
〔女王の条件〕

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## PROLOGUE

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It was a stormy night. Strong, howling winds shook the windows and the sound of slashing rain mixed with the roaring thunder. Bright lightning lit up the room for a moment despite the heavy curtains draped over the window.

Sommevesle's Second Prince, Guido, was ten years old that night. Though old enough to handle the storm, the unpredictable thunder and lightning still startled the young prince, making it difficult for him to sleep. He simply lay down on his bed, kept his eyes shut, waiting for the storm to subside.

He knew not how much time had passed when he heard a soft knock on his door. Guido woke up and turned his head towards the door, wondering who it might be. Then another knock came, though the sound lacked the sharpness for an intended knock.

“...Who is it?”

“I've got my hands full here. Guido, open the door.”

On the other side of the door was his older half-brother of two years, Friedhelm, the First Prince of Sommevesle. Guido followed his brother's order and found his younger half-sister, Leticia, on Friedhelm's back. The reason behind the soft knock was because Friedhelm knocked using his feet.

Leticia, or Leti, was the First Princess and was four years younger than Guido. She was wrapping her dainty hands around Friedhelm's neck and her eyes were tightly shut, probably because she was scared of thunder.

“What’s the matter?”

“Well, I can’t allow Leti to sleep alone on a night like this. She’s still young. Besides, I was also worried you might be scared of the thunder.”

Leti has a full younger brother, Leonhardt. He was born a year after Leti and their mother was probably staying with him all night, leaving Leti alone.

“Alright, let’s all sleep together! The bed may be a bit small for the three of us but bear with it for tonight. Leti will sleep in the middle.”

Guido thought he was no match for his older brother, who was, in all sense of the name, an “Older Brother”. Friedhelm did not forget to check on Leti and on him even on a night like this.

“Guido Onii-sama<sup>1</sup> will also be sleeping with Leti?”

“Yeah, so everything is all right, no need to be scared.”

Guido gently said to Leti and helped her get down from Friedhelm’s back and up to the bed. Guido’s bed was not small for a ten year old child to sleep alone but it was a bit narrow for three children to sleep in. But he thought the closer they snuggled, the safer would Leti feel.

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<sup>1</sup> Onii-sama: Onii =Older Brother | Sama = formal honorific for a high person

Leti fell asleep after a while, but Guido could not. The thunder gradually became softer and Guido was thinking about the assignment given to him this afternoon.

“Can’t sleep?”

“Yeah. I was thinking about my assignment.”

Guido heard Friedhelm sigh about him being too serious.

“What assignment is that, enough to bother Guido, the perfect and wise child like our great-grandmother?”

“To write a composition about my dream for the future. Have you written anything like that, Ani’ue<sup>2</sup>? ”

“Oh, that one. Yeah. I have. But it was something they made me write to please Grandfather Lauenstein. So it’s probably the same for you, it’s something to please your Grandfather Eulenberg. Write that you want to be king. I’m sure that’ll be enough to satisfy them.”

“I will.” But he noticed something in the way Friedhelm had said it.

“Do you not want to be king, Ani’ue?”

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<sup>2</sup> Ani’ue. A Japanese honorific referring to one’s older brother (More formal and old fashioned than the normal *Onii-san*)

“Who knows? I mean, being a King is something like a future that is prepared for me rather than being *my* dream. It’s like being an adult.”

Hearing the words spoken out loud made Guido realize that maybe, he was just the same as well.

“Can’t the heir be Leti or Leon? That way, I could be —— in the future.”

The thunder roared, silencing Guido’s voice for a moment. Then after the thunder subsided, Friedhelm said, “Me too.”

“—do, Prince Guido.”

Guido opened his eyes when he heard a voice whispering in his ears. He slowly opened his eyes and was surprised to see Leti’s young face grow older. Soon he realized that he had been dreaming just a moment ago.

“Are you alright? Shall I have a room prepared for you to rest?”

“No, I’m alright.”

“Are you certain? It is strange for you to openly sleep in a place such as this.”

Today was one of their regular tea parties Leti had suggested to have. Guido came first and they were waiting for Friedhelm in a

drawing room in the Royal Villa. Guido unconsciously closed his eyes and fell asleep when Leti had left him alone for a while.

“Did I...did I say something?”

“No, nothing in particular, but you were frowning quite hard and I thought you were having a nightmare so...”

A maid came in, informing them of Friedhelm’s arrival. Leti stood up and left the room to welcome Friedhelm, leaving Guido behind so she did not hear him say that his dream was, indeed, a nightmare.

“Hey! Are you doing well?” Friedhelm greeted Leti with unnecessarily overflowing liveliness and she returned his greeting with a perfect smile for they were in the presence of other people, specifically Friedhelm’s knights. After the greetings, Leti ushered him, alone, to the drawing room where Guido was waiting.

“I am doing fine. But Prince Guido, on the other hand, does not look so well. He even fell asleep for a few minutes in *my*, his enemy’s, room.”

“That’s serious. He ain’t someone who’d let anyone attack him in his sleep... and here I was, thinking that he was feeling fine since Queen Sofia’s funeral.”

They were only a few steps from the drawing room but they stopped. They did not want Guido to hear this conversation.

“Two months have passed since Queen Sofia’s death. He is probably feeling the pain and loneliness now that things have settled down.”

Two months ago, the bells of mourning rang throughout the castle. It was about a month after the Ghost Energy incident.

Guido’s mother, the Second Queen Consort Sofia, had been sick for a while already. Everybody was prepared for her imminent death. But for her real son, there were still too many memories that caused hurt and pain.

“Better speak warmly with him today. Do not bite at each other’s neck,” warned Leti.

Queen Sofia left Guido in Leti’s care. Leti understood that she meant it for her to be cooperative when Guido became King. But despite that, Leti still could not easily disrespect Queen Sofia’s request.

“But ain’t this the job of his fiancée, Lady Eleanor?”

“Stop making that obviously troubled face. If he noticed that his siblings were worried about him, it might become his support, though I am well aware he is not one who will notice it.”

Guido was both serious and dense. He could not possibly know anyone who was actually worried about him unless it was plainly told to his face. But he was also not someone who could easily brush off anyone who was worried about him. Guido’s rationale for

controlling his emotions was one his good points, but it was a bad point as well.

“That is the most we can do for Prince Guido...because we are not on good terms with each other.”

“Well, yes of course. I am only *forced* to attend this tea party to give my recommendations for Princess Leticia’s future husband. I don’t care about Guido...I don’t care at all.”

“And Prince Guido is attending as well to stop you from your plans.”

Leti and Friedhelm reassured each other about where they stood.

“If someone from Kleinschmidt was here, this would be a tea party with the complete representative of the top of the Kingdom.”

“Then let’s just have one with the three of us. Kleinschmidt has fallen from grace anyway.”

“Well, I guess you are right,” Leti agreed with Friedhelm.

Inside Sommevesle’s social structure, there were three families considered to be special among the noble families, namely, the Lauensteins – Friedhelm’s faction, the Eulenbergs – Guido’s faction and the fallen Kleinschmidts. These families were collectively known as the Three Grand Marquises. They were special even among the other marquises, despite having the same title because they had descended from the royal family.

So why are they not considered part of the royal family despite their lineage and simply treated as special nobles?

Leti's great-grandfather, the Administration King Karlheinz, created a decree that stripped down the three dukedoms of their eligibility to inherit the throne and dropped their ranks from being "dukes" to "marquises" as punishment for abusing their power and using it for their personal gains.

"Great-grandfather left us something troublesome. It might've been a wise decision at the time but now, it's nothing but a problem for us."

Exactly as Friedhelm said, the way things were viewed changed as time passed.

"Wanting to be a royalty again is a frustrating desire. They reaped what they sowed. They could just be satisfied with the special treatment they were receiving."

"Well, as if Your Royal Pureness could understand us."

Leti, with a King for a father and a royal for a mother was sometimes referred to as a "pure-blooded Princess".

"But you are of pure royalty yourself."

"Half, yes. The other half is the cursed bloodline of the Lauensteins who lost their right to the throne. Now then, would the Leftover Princess be kind to show me the room where we shall have our private tea party?"

Leti coldly glared at Friedhelm for his unfunny joke.

“Say that again and I will scream ‘No! Onii-sama, stop! I am your sister!’ at the top of my lungs and mess up my hair and dress a bit to complete the picture.”

“Quit that! That won’t be a joke at all!”

‘Leftover Princess’ was nothing but an unpleasant nickname for Leti. Her two excellent brothers, both coming from one of the ‘Three Grand Marquises’, made the succession for the throne a complicated problem. The competition between the two princes grew worse over the years and the King was deeply hurt by it. So to prevent the strife from getting worse, the King came up with a novel idea. He selected Leti as the heir to the throne. So in other words, Leti picked up the crown that fell from the two princes, a leftover crown, thus, she was the ‘Leftover Princess’.

But despite all of the conflict, Leti knew that her two brothers cared for each other deeply. They had just become the symbols of the political war between their families that they had to pretend otherwise.

“This is the third tea party. I guess it’s about time I get to hear about what’s running inside the head of our next queen.”

“These tea parties are meant to eradicate all rumors circulating about an impending civil war. It will be a big problem if the neighboring countries think of this as an opportunity for them.”

“I agree with that...So, how much on good terms shall we be?”

Right now, Friedhelm and Guido met up with each other out of obligation and nothing was really different with their relationship.

“Tell me, how does the next queen plan to solve the strife between the two princes? Will you make the two parties reconcile with each other? Or will you keep them in check with some provisions? Or will you step up and intervene with the Three Grand Marquises problem?”

“Did you think I would tell you, a political enemy, what my plans are for the future?”

“I know *you* will. Make that one of your assignments. I'll wait for your answer.”

Leti felt Friedhelm was testing her. If she gave him a half-assed answer, then this brother of hers, who was more fit to be king, would undoubtedly stand up to oppose her.

Leti knew, more than anyone, that her most difficult enemy was just right beside her.



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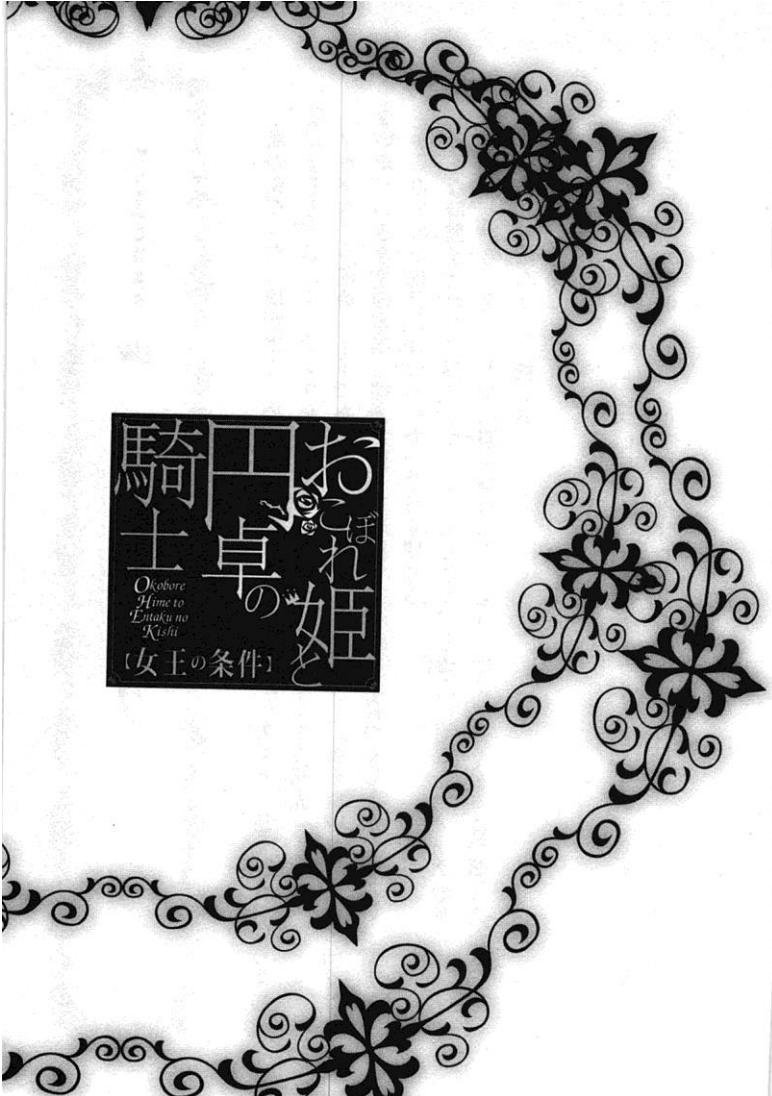
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**Credits:**

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- ❖ Translation: Crystal Hikari
- ❖ Proofreading: Scylla
- ❖ Quality Checking: Mizououji

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- ❖ Thoughts are signified by *italics*.
- ❖ The titles for this volume are all based on chess terms.



騎士の姫  
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〔女王の条件〕

*Okobore  
Hime to  
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CHAPTER I OPENING

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The Knight King Christian, the first king of Sommevesle, and his knights were said to have always congregated at a round table, symbolizing equality for all the members. This was passed on from one generation to another and was believed to be the origin of the Twelve Knights of the Round.

A *knights* king, *Knights* of the Round – these were clear representations of Sommevesle's particular fascination with knights. And in a country such as this, a Martial Arts Tournament, where knights fought against each other under a set of rules, was not something to be surprised of.

“An invitation to the Martial Arts Tournament?”

“Yes. I know you have never joined it, but at least you do know about it, do you not?”

Sommevesle's first princess, Leticia, brashly threw the invitation at her knight, Duke Barchet, whom she had just recently succeeded in recruiting after making a scene. Her un-princess-like action clearly showed her dislike for the invitation.

“To participate in the tournament, one has to be a knight – not just a simple knight by name but a knight with a rightful master. In other words, only honorary knights can take part in it.”

*Knight* has two meanings in Sommevesle.

One is *Royal Knight*. This refers to the members of the Royal Chivalric Order. The Order was established to protect the peace and order of the kingdom. Duke was one of them.

The other meaning is *Honorary Knight*. This, on the other hand, is the title given to anyone who has sworn loyalty to their one chosen master. For this knight, there are several reasons why they choose to become one. Some choose to be one in order to protect their master; some are scholars who are knights by name alone and there are those who simply want to use their master's name and connections.

Duke was a Royal Knight and was also Leti's Honorary Knight and the Knight of the First Seat of the future Knights of the Round. The invitation for the tournament was sent due to the second position he currently held.

“They say it is for friendly competition and a chance for interaction between the knights, but this is actually nothing but a place for masters to show off their knights. Men,” punctuated Leti.

“But since I already have you as my knight, we *have* to participate in it. I am certain that you have wide connections amongst the knights since you graduated from the Knight Academy but your connections as a nobleman are limited. Better use this opportunity to expand them.”

“So you’re saying that that is my main goal and not to win?”

“Seventh Heaven and Valkyrie will also be competing in it. I do not have any intentions of demanding the impossible from you.”

“Demand the impossible, huh.”

True, first prince Friedhelm’s “Seventh Heaven” and second prince Guido’s “Valkyrie” were composed of the best knights in the kingdom. So for Leti to ask Duke to win the competition was synonymous to her asking him to be the strongest knight in Sommevesle.

“Anyway, the real problem for this is that knights are the only ones allowed within the tournament grounds so there will be no one there to stand as my guard during your matches. If it were for me, I do not mind that at all, but I have my position as a princess to consider.”

Leti was perfectly capable of protecting herself from any form of danger but since she was known to the world as a defenceless, sweet princess, it would not be acceptable for her to not have a knight by her side for the duration of the tournament.

“I was planning to borrow one knight from Father’s Round, but truthfully, I do not want to show people that I rely on him. However, that was the only way I could think of without worrying about the political balance between the factions.”

The political balance had been a long-standing problem for the current king, Leti’s father. In order to keep this balance, he selected his First Queen from the royal family. This action would

serve as a restraint for the Three Grand Marquises. But time passed and they did not have children so he decided to take two more queen consorts at the same time. The Second Queen was from Eulenberg and the Third Queen was from Lauenstein, in order to show that he was impartial. Leti inferred this notion had been made to keep the balance even before she was chosen as the crown princess.

“...I think I know someone who can be your temporary knight for the tournament,” said Duke.

“Someone?”

“Yeah. Someone willing to be your knight and you still get to keep the political balance.”

Duke knew the perfect person who was unaffiliated and would be glad to be Leti's knight. But Duke himself was not really fond of the idea of asking that person. Ask him why he felt that way and he would probably answer with, “I don't know”.

## ❖❖❖❖❖

The Knight King's Space was where the consciousness of the reincarnations of Sommevesle's first king, The Knight King Christian, could gather together. The room was decorated with a grand wooden chandelier and the floor was lined with lush carpet

embroidered with tales of the gods framed in golden ears of grain. In the middle of the room was a beautiful patina table made of evergreen oak and around it were ornate chairs made out of the same wood. The reincarnations of the Knight King come to this place during their dreams.

Leti had no plans to visit the Knight King's Space tonight but she soon found herself seated in one of the chairs. Tonight it was particularly crowded and she decided to start the conversation with the other four kings.

“Martial Arts Tournament? Juli prohibited having it during my time,” said the twelfth king, The Lion King Alexander who was surprised to hear that the tournament was being held again.

“What did you do that forced King Julius to prohibit it?” asked Leti.

“I challenged the winner to fight me. Every time. So I guess he got fed up with me and decided to stop it all together.”

*Just as expected of the hot-headed king,* Leti thought.

“The tournament is a lively affair in my time. I remember secretly betting with my knights on who would be the winner.”

“If the historians of the future learned that the celebrated, incorruptible, and clean Administrative King Karlheinz did such a thing, I am certain they might be shocked out of their minds.

Please do them a favour and not write it in your diary. Bring it with you to your grave,” commented Leti.

Leti’s great-grandfather, the seventeenth king, The Administrative King Karlheinz, smiled gently and told his great-granddaughter to overlook the deed. The bet was only over a bottle of wine.

“...I do not have it in mine...we do not have the time nor the resources anyway...” said The One-Armed King Oswald, a reincarnation after Leti’s time. He was currently in the middle of a dire war, which in a sense, was like having a tournament every day.

“...Yes, of course...Anyway, try to think about it as entertainment for the future,” Leti said to cheer him up.

“Is that so? Challenges are already banned in my time. Or rather the notion of a knight itself is unclear,” said the Heartbroken King Ludgar.

“Do the Knights of the Round still exist?” asked Leti.

“Well, that is the collective term for the military generals.”

Ludgar was a reincarnation from a later future than Oswald. He was called the ‘Heartbroken King’ because he was famous for the number of heartbreaks he had to endure, but he had a proper title and the word did not exist yet in Leti’s time.

“...A peaceful time, is it not? Queen Leticia’s time,” Oswald said. He was living in a time of endless war and was probably envious of Leti’s era.

“Indeed. I sometimes find it strange why a reincarnation of the Knight King is needed. There is not even a chance to use the Knight King’s power at all,” agreed Leti.

“No. A day will come when you will have to use it. You will...”

A loud crash cut Oswald’s words. Alexander, who was seated beside Leti, kicked the table where he had been resting his feet a while ago.

“Oi, King Oswald! Telling the future to someone who doesn’t wanna hear it is against the rules! Do you want me to shut your mouth, huh?”

“But some things will be better if she knew about it...I know. I wanted to.”

“So you’re saying that’s how it is for others because that’s how it was for you? You kept on yapping on things like that so your arm got chopped off by your cousin, stupid king!” called out Alexander.

The atmosphere had turned dark and intense. Leti stood up to control the situation.

“Stop that, you two! ‘A slip of the tongue’ exists in both times, does it not? If this becomes more than a verbal argument, I shall

take things into my own hands and force you both to calm down. If you think you can win against me who has eleven of the Swords of Promise, then step up!”

The reincarnations of The Knight King had the “Knight Sword” and the “Twelve Swords of Promise”, a total of thirteen swords created to protect the Knight King, sealed inside their bodies.

Leti recently granted the Sword of White Light, one of the Twelve Swords of Promise, to save a particular lad so she now only had a total of twelve swords in her.

“...I will go now. I doubt I can win with only three swords left,” said Oswald. He probably chose to go either because he decided he would be the one to leave or because he was truly offended by what Alexander said.

“I shall go back as well. I cannot stand more of this atmosphere,” Leti said and left.

## ନାଟ୍ୟମାର୍ଗ

Leti woke up in a foul mood due to what had happened in the Knight King’s Space.

Leti declared before to the other Kings that she had no desire to know the future. However, The One-Armed King slipped his tongue some days ago regarding Leti's informal title, "Heartbreaker Queen".

"No. Definitely not. That will *absolutely* not happen."

*I am only surrounded by knights near my age so I gained such a title and not because I have many lovers. No. Definitely not. I want to believe that of my future self.* Leti convinced herself.

"I have ignored the rumours going around about Duke being my lover, but maybe it is about time I do something about it...But if I or Duke deny it, it would just backfire on us making us even more suspicious."

Leti continued pondering on how to deal with this particular problem as her maid helped her get dressed. Afterwards, another maid came, informing her that Duke had come together with the temporary knight he had prepared for her for the Martial Arts Tournament.

"Your highness! I'll work hard today!" greeted the rookie knight of the Royal Chivalric Order with his head bowing down to Leti.

Astrid Gale was considered a top-class knight due to his unusual skills despite being a newbie. He was a commoner but he was already rumoured to have the potential to be the next Commander of the Royal Chivalric Order.

“So you were the person Duke had in mind for my temporary knight. Well, you are indeed unaffiliated,” *but wholly unexpected*, finished Leti in her mind.

Further consideration of the idea made Leti realize that he was indeed a likely candidate and simply became unexpected because she was the one who consciously removed him from the likely candidates Duke would have in mind. It seemed like she and Astrid were strangely connected.

Astrid – one of Duke’s juniors – actually had a dark past despite his seemingly innocent and harmless face. But this young man was elated when Duke asked him to be Leti’s knight and was jumping with joy when he said, “Yes. Yes sir! I will, I will, I will! I will give my best to protect her highness!”

Whether his joy was because he could gaze up close to the beautiful Princess Leticia or because this was the perfect chance for him to promote himself to be Leti’s knight, Duke did not know.

Duke had previously tried covertly asking Astrid who was his desired master but he skilfully dodged the topic every time, intentionally or not.

Leti who was the most likely candidate for Astrid’s chosen master, agreed to have him as her temporary knight.

“You do not have to do much. All you have to do is to stand behind me all throughout the tournament. Let us go then.”



So Leti, together with Astrid acting as her knight in place of Duke, went to the Royal Chivalric Order's training grounds where the tournament would be held.

There were tents put up to serve as a place for the audience to stay. An elaborate tent stood out amongst the simple ones and inside it where three equally elaborate chairs. Friedhelm claimed one chair on the side and Guido filled up the other one on the opposite side and the middle seat was open. The two princes would never sit beside each other on friendly terms. This was their public stance; this was what was expected of them.

“Well, well, well. A pleasant day to you, your royal highness.”

“Good day.” Leti curly returned Friedhelm’s sarcastic greeting with a perfect princess smile.

“Oh, Astrid? Since when did you become Leti's knight?”

Friedhelm was surprised to find the baby-faced Astrid standing behind Leti instead of the tall Duke.

“Duke prepared him as my temporary knight for the tournament. Duke will be busy with his own matches and he will also be assisting the Knights of the Round for the management of the tournament so he cannot stay by my side at all. You may use this time to recruit Astrid to your Seventh Heaven,” explained Leti.

“Then I'll do just that. Hey, Astrid, be my knight!”

“I will think about it, your highness,” replied Astrid. This had been his usual answer for a while but Friedhelm noticed that his eyes were now different.

*Temporary knight? Those are the eyes of a loyal guard dog already. I let another good one slip out of my hands,* thought Friedhelm. He did not know when Astrid had come to his decision but he knew that those eyes would not even look back at him no matter how much he invited him. Leti took Duke first, and sooner or later, she would be taking in Astrid.

*I guess, just as expected of my sister,* mused Friedhelm.

“Knights are weak against beautiful princesses, right?” Friedhelm asked for agreement from his knights who gave him a yes, saying that ladies were creatures naturally to be protected. Friedhelm slouched deeper in his chair, sulking like a child when he heard them say this.

Leti acted coolly and disregarded Friedhelm’s sarcastic remarks, but she was truly fuming inside

*A knight-charmer has no right to tell me that!* Leti fumed.

“Astrid, why don’t we make a bet on who’ll win this tournament?” Friedhelm asked.

“Bet?” Astrid asked curiously with his head tilted to one side.

“Yeah. Who do you think it will be? If you win, I’ll give you the best wine in my cellar. If I win, you become my knight. What d’ you say?”

“I’m sorry, your highness, but I don’t drink.”

“*Humph.* You’re no fun at all. Darn it. I lost because I do not have any sweet treats to lure a kid.” Friedhelm grumbled in his seat, complaining at Astrid’s refusal.

Astrid clearly said that he *does not* drink rather than he *cannot* drink. This clearly showed that he did not even want to bet his knighthood with Friedhelm. And no one knew if Astrid did it intentionally or if he was just naturally clueless.

While Friedhelm was thinking about Astrid, Astrid himself had a big question inside him and he finally found the courage to ask it.

“Uhm...Please pardon me, but what is this tournament in the first place?”

Astrid’s question was truly *out of place*. Leti unintentionally slipped out of her facade and Friedhelm unknowingly let out an exasperated, “Eh?”

It seemed like Duke only told Astrid that he wanted him to be a temporary knight, nothing more, nothing less.

“The tournament, or officially, the Martial Arts Tournament is a competition between the honorary knights in the kingdom. Though it is called a tournament, the only prize they will get is

honour and being branded as the strongest knight in Sommevesle,” explained Leti.

“Are they going to fight?”

“Yes. They will fight as knights – meaning they will be fighting using the same sword within a time limit as shown by the hourglass over there. The judges are the present Knights of the Round as they are not participating in the tournament.”

“A fight between knights, using the same sword...then...” Astrid said glancing at the busy Duke who was helping in the preparations for the tournament.

“...it shall be Duke-senpai<sup>1</sup>.”

Leti's reaction was delayed due to her surprise at Astrid's answer. Before Leti could even ask Astrid for an explanation, Friedhelm glared at Astrid.

“A-S-T-R-I-D! You bloke! You said the one thing no one dared to utter despite knowing it!”

“E-h!? Is that so? Please forgive me,” Astrid apologized despite not understanding what he did wrong.

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<sup>1</sup> Senpai – a Japanese honorific used in addressing one's senior

Then Friedhelm smiled at Leti, who was still at a lost on what Astrid had meant.

“I won’t be recruiting Duke to Seventh Heaven just because he is my friend. I have my reasons, and of course, he does as well.” Friedhelm said as he pointed his head towards Guido’s direction.

Leti knew that Guido had recruited Duke before but Duke never mentioned it to her. The only reason she could think of was that Guido wanted to prevent Duke, someone from his faction, from becoming Friedhelm’s knight, but based on Friedhelm’s words, it was not the only reason.

“Well then, why don’t we take a seat and enjoy the performance of the future First Seat Knight of the Knights of the Round.”

And then the tournament commenced.

The matches proceeded one by one. Some were close and entertaining fights and some finished quickly. Leti kept watching Duke from the corner of her eye while she was watching the matches. Looking at him was enough to know he was busy helping out as a future Knight of the Round and learning from the incumbent ones.

After a long wait, it was now Duke’s turn.

“Your highness, please watch carefully. Duke-senpai’s match will be over in three moves.” Astrid said to Leti, his voice was oozing with pride for his respected senior.

“Three moves?” asked Leti.

“What? Did he get even better? Unbelievable...” said a surprised Friedhelm.

“They say that it is the most efficient fighting move for knights but Senpai is the only one I know who can do it.”

Leti determined before that Duke was weaker than the genius-assassin Astrid, so if this genius was so sure that Duke would win, maybe he really would.

*I have heard that his skills were one of if not the best in the Order but...,* thought Leti.

Leti decided to focus on watching the match of her own knight and measure his true abilities.

An incumbent Knight of the Round stood and gave the signal to start the battle. As soon as the sign was given, Duke quickly made his move.

The best fighting move for a knight is composed of these three moves.

One, cross swords with the opponent and charge forcefully to break the opponent’s stance.

Two, strongly wield the sword, forcing the opponent to lose his grip on his own sword, making him defenceless.

And three, thrust the sword and point it towards the opponent's neck to signal his defeat and the end of the match with a lot of sand still left in the hourglass.

Everyone was in awe with Duke's skilful, precise, and well-executed three-move attack. Even the referee was rendered speechless for a moment before he announced Duke's win.

*He is...He really is* strong, thought an amazed Leti. That demonstration alone was enough for her to know that Duke's skills were far beyond the skills than that of a regular first-rate knight.

“So, how was it?” Friedhelm asked with a smug face to Leti and he gave a detailed commentary about the fight.

“For a knight battle fought fair and square, there are only three factors to consider: technique, power and speed. And as you've seen, Duke is way above the others for all of those factors. No one comes close.”

“But I remember someone bragging that he was on par with Duke during their Academy days. Who was that again?”

“Duke was a flimsy lad at the time and I had more height.”

“So you want to say that he lacked the power before,” confirmed Leti.

What Leti saw in this tournament was a far more polished fighting style than the one she witnessed before when Duke fought some street thugs during one of her incognito walks.

*So why does he prefer using that practical fighting style? He is already strong as it is,* wondered Leti. Then she remembered Duke's excessively strong junior.

Astrid seemed to be the source of Duke's complex and he wanted to prove that he was not only strong *as a knight*.

Duke always acted as the understanding, mature adult to Leti but he was a just a childish man when it came to Astrid.

*This is why you are just a youngster. You should be more assertive,* thought Leti. Being strong as a knight was a valuable asset, especially in this peaceful time. She decided to compliment Duke later and moved on to ask Astrid.

“But I heard that you and Duke had equal records in the Order? Why is that?”

Duke himself told Leti before that he and Astrid were equals, but Friedhelm said a while ago that no one came near to Duke so Leti wanted an explanation.

“Yes, we do have equal records because I collect points from other battles. But if it's a straight swordfight, I hate to admit it, but it'll be my complete loss. But if it's over something else and there aren't be any rules, I am certain I can win.”

“Do you also have other battles aside from swords in the Order?” asked a curious Leti.

“Yes, we do your highness. We may be called knights, but most of our tasks now are stopping disputes in town or catching pickpockets. Fighting with swords would be difficult because we might accidentally wound innocent people in the area so we also train in different fighting styles,” explained Astrid.

Examples of these different fighting styles were hand-to-hand combat, knives, and other items that could be considered more practical. Out of all of those styles being taught in the Order, Astrid’s favourite was “The correct way to stop a drunkard with a pitcher ~Pub version~”.

“Senpai’s so great.” Astrid said, as if voicing out Leti’s thoughts.

Leti did not openly agree with Astrid but she was forced to admit to herself that she was elated with Duke’s performance.

Duke, on the other hand, was being praised by his seniors in the Knights of the Round and was told him to keep this momentum for the rest of the tournament.

*I see. So the rumours about him being the next Commander for the Order were not rumours at all,* realized Leti as she saw how Duke was surrounded by his colleagues.

A knight with the best swordsmanship, a calm and decisive attitude, and being fully trusted by the other knights, add to that his noble blood, were the conditions for the ideal Commander and Duke satisfied all of these. Leti took away from the Royal Chivalric Order their future perfect Commander.

While Leti was feeling a little sorry for the Order for what she did, something dripped onto her from above. Leti felt something cold touch her cheek and her surroundings suddenly turned frantic even before she could react.

“Leticia!” said an alarmed Guido.

“No! Look up!” shouted Friedhelm and Astrid.

Leti followed their words and looked up, and then something dripped down again, falling onto her hair. She touched it, dirtying her sleeve in the process – dirtying it with blood.

“What the...Quick! Call the Knights of the Round! This is gonna get really complicated...” Friedhelm was the first one to snap out of shock and gave instructions to Seventh Heaven and then Guido brought Leti to his side. The blood dripping from the tent’s roof did not look like it would stop at any moment and everybody just looked up at the bloody sight.

“What’s wrong!?” Duke’s voice cut through the heavy atmosphere and what he saw was his bloodied master – her beautiful blonde hair and white cheeks were stained scarlet.

Duke was already dreading the worst when Leti calmly shook her head and told him to look up. “Calm down. This is not mine. Look up.”

Duke followed what Leti said and saw where the blood was coming from.

“A lamp...with blood inside?”

The position of the lamp was not unnatural so probably no one noticed it until blood started leaking out of it.

“I’ll bring it down.” Astrid said. He stood up on the backrest of Leti’s chair and used it as a springboard to jump up. He took the lamp and landed perfectly on his feet.

“Ah! Blood is still leaking out.” Astrid’s hand was smeared with the blood dripping out of the lamp and when he opened it, the bloody scent filled the training grounds that Leti had to cover her nose with her clean sleeve.

“...a bird’s corpse? Who’d do something like this?” said Astrid.

Leti thought this was too much for a simple prank.

Sealed inside the lamp was a beheaded bird. The lamp was hanging from the tent and blood had slowly leaked out of the gaps in the lamp and dripped down so its existence could be discovered. Or maybe it was meant to be found.

“Astrid, go and wash your hands. Then bring one wet and one dry cloth for her highness,” ordered Duke.

“Yes Sir! One wet and one dry!” Astrid confirmed the order and swiftly moved out.

“Your highness, are you feeling all right? Do you feel dizzy or nauseated?”

“No. I am all right,” Leti calmly answered Duke’s worried question.

Leti, fortunately or unfortunately, was not delicate enough to faint upon the sight and scent of blood. She was rather busy thinking about who would do such a thing and why.

*This was prepared beforehand and not that difficult to do. Is this just a simple prank or something else...?* Leti pondered. But sadly, she did not have the time to think about it calmly. The news about the incident was already spreading out and people were starting to gather around their tent. Guido went out to disperse the people and Friedhelm examined the lamp and the bird.

“Take out the lamp and then the chair and carpet stained with blood. Leticia, don’t come out yet, it’ll make things worse. Not until you’ve wiped the blood that can be seen.”

The knights immediately followed Friedhelm’s orders and took out the lamp, the bloodstained chair, and finally the carpet, revealing the ground.

“Wait a minute, this is...” murmured Friedhelm.

Everyone inside the tent gasped because beneath the carpet was a geometrical pattern drawn on the ground where Leti's chair had been.

“Oi! Someone call Leonhardt! Sir Scholar is familiar with this, isn't he? I know what this is for, but I don't know that much,” said Friedhelm.

The pattern drawn was a pentagram – a five-pointed star that was a symbol of instability and unknown characters surrounded it. Anyone who saw it could conclude that it was a magic circle drawn to curse someone. And then beside the circle was a message Leti burned into her mind.

“I know who you *truly* are.” Leti read the message out loud.

*This certainly refers to me and is most likely connected to The Knight King.* Leti sighed; foreseeing how much trouble this would be if it were true. As if on cue, Astrid came back with the two washcloths.

“Your highness! I have returned with the cloth!”

“Thank you.” Leti said and took the wet cloth first to wipe out the drying blood on her face and hair but the blood on her dress had stained already and would not be taken off with a normal washing.

*And one of my favourite dresses just got ruined in the rain recently...aah, this is the worst.* Leti decided to leave the rest to her two brothers

and the Knights of the Round. If only she was a man, wiping away the blood would be enough and she could continue investigating the incident. But no, she was a princess with a reputation to protect. It was during these types of situations that Leti found being a princess inconvenient.

“Duke, we are leaving.”

“Wait.” Guido called out. He took off his coat and then handed it to a surprised Leti. Leti was suspicious of him so Guido added a few words.

“Put that on. I can’t just let a lady stained with blood walk around exposing herself.”

“Thank you, but there is no need. Today is cold. But if you insist on it, I shall take my knight’s,” refused Leti.

“Treat this as my thanks for taking care of Cornelia’s birthday. Thank you for doing that in place of Mother.”

Leti had taken over the preparations for Cornelia’s – Guido’s full younger sister – birthday in place of their mother who had passed away.

“Well then, I shall return it afterwards...and one more thing, Bishop to G2.”

“Got it.”

After that Leti signalled to Duke with her eyes and went out of the tent. It had been a long time since Leti had received that kind of brotherly treatment and she knew not how to react. She was conscious of the slight warmth lingering in her brother's jacket.

Outside the tent, knights had already gathered around it, curiously trying to find out what had happened inside. Leti thought that the person who pulled off the prank might be around so she carefully examined the faces of the persons around. Using the Sword of Gale Wind, she gathered the speaking voices around her.

The murmurs reached Leti's ears and she concentrated on filtering out any useful information from the swarm of confused and curious "what happened?", "how 'bout the tournament?" and "looks like it's cancelled".

*The criminal would likely say something that does not fit into this current situation,* considered Leti.

"...earlier than planned..."

Leti stopped walking upon hearing those words. The utterance was out of context. She turned to identify the speaker but the

voice itself was already muffled and it was impossible to know to whom it belonged to.

“Your highness?”

“...Let us talk as we walk. First, remember the people who are here at this moment,” commanded Leti. When they reached a place with no people, she started explaining her thoughts to Duke.

“I heard a whisper a while ago saying ‘earlier than planned’. I wonder *what* happened earlier than planned.”

“The tournament started as planned. There isn’t anything that happened *earlier than planned*,” replied Duke.

“I agree, I was thinking the same thing. Maybe the discovery of that lantern was supposed to happen after the tournament.”

The perpetrator probably did not expect blood to leak out of the lamp and the magic circle might have planned to be discovered when the training ground was being cleaned.

“But if I were the one who did it, I’d prefer the blood to leak out. It’d be more gruesome and convincing than knowing you were sitting in a cursed chair,” said Duke.

“Yes, I see your point...” whispered Leti.

*So did they want to stop the tournament? Or... No. This is not good. I am going too quickly and searching for a reason for the conclusion. Leti, calm down and think of it in the right order,* Leti scolded herself.

Leti immediately asked her maid to prepare a pen and some papers as soon as they reached her room. There was something she had to ask Duke to do before he forgot.

“Write down what I requested of you a while ago.”

Leti asked Duke to write the names of the people that were around the scene. Duke followed her order and started writing on the paper.

“...eh? In a sequence? No? ...Are you...” murmured Leti.

Duke’s hand smoothly wrote onto the paper the names of the people in the area, but he was not writing it like a list. He had used so much paper that some fell down onto the floor.

Leti thought he would be writing the names as he remembered them, but she soon understood what Duke was doing when he started drawing lines and marking the paper with landmarks.

“...Did you remember the people who were there and their respective positions in that short span of time?”

“I learned how to due to the demands of the job. I probably overlooked someone so don’t trust this too much.”

Duke wrote onto the paper the names of the people who were there—knights who were helping out for the tournament, honorary knights who participated in the battle, and the nobles

who came to watch, and these names were written on where they had stood at that moment. He wrote landmarks like, where the tents were to make it easier to visualize. In other words, he remembered not only who, but also where the people were when Leti asked him to *remember* them.

“This is certainly convenient. It would be of great help if I can have another one of you.”

“Don’t ask for the impossible. Anyway, does this mean the people here are suspects?”

“Yes. I am not sure *what* happened earlier than planned but it will not hurt to consider this as one of the possibilities,” concluded Leti.

The criminal was still on the loose. There were people in the Royal Villa and guards were already stationed around it but Duke, thinking of the worst possible scenario, said, “I’ll bring Astrid here. Don’t go wandering around anywhere until he has arrived.”

“I understand. Let us have him as my temporary knight for a while longer. And one more thing Duke...”

Leti stopped Duke who was already hurrying back to the Order’s Camp to call Astrid.

“I saw your match. You are strong. I heard rumours saying that you were number one or two within the Order but I did not believe it was true.”

Astrid's unbelievable strength somehow overshadowed Duke's strength but Duke was also strong enough to be included in the same category. Leti felt a little frustrated with herself for underestimating her own knight and not knowing how strong he was until now.

"As a knight, yes. But if it's a fight to the death with Astrid, it'll be my complete defeat."

Duke thought that even if he was strong as a knight, it would be meaningless if he could not protect his master when it came down to a real fight. But Leti thought otherwise.

"I do not expect and will not ask that kind of strength from you. If I had to face Astrid, I can kill him instantly," Leti said plainly.

"...You won't tell me how even if I ask, will you?"

Duke did not dare step on Leti's secret. He never forced her to tell him about it. If Leti wanted to tell him, then he was willing to listen. That was it for Duke.

*And you act so mature when it comes to me,* Leti sighed in her heart.

Duke's inferiority complex, in a way, was connected to his desire to improve himself but too much of it would get to him and he would end up looking down on himself. This would be bad for both Leti and Duke so she decided to breach onto his complex.

“Yes, I will not tell you. But look, even if I can kill Astrid, I cannot win in the tournament as a knight. *You* can. That is your value. Next time I shall *order* you to win. If you remember, I said I do not have any intentions of demanding the impossible from you.”

“True. That is not impossible for me. Then, I shall do as you wish.”

Leti, satisfied with Duke’s answer, finished the conversation, but Duke gave her one final warning.

“Don’t go anywhere until Astrid arrives.”

“I cannot possibly go out even if I wanted to. I still have to wash myself and change my clothes. You do not have to worry. Now go.”

Duke took his leave and hurried back to the Order’s Camp, but on his way back, he glanced back at the Royal Villa where Leti was.

“...I feel like she has seen right through me,” whispered Duke.

Leti did not give Duke an obvious compliment. She did not tell him he was amazing or excellent or great. She simply told him that she would order him to win since she now knew he could do it.

Duke knew himself well. He knew that if he received any straight compliments, he would simply be embarrassed and put on a cold face but what Leti did fit more to his personality – to

demand something from him, something that he could do. This would probably motivate him more.

“This ability to make people dance to their rhythm is very similar to Prince Friedhelm. Does it run in the king’s blood? Damn it.”

Friedhelm’s and Leti’s mothers were different so this ability was most likely from their father. Duke felt defeated and unconsciously uttered a swear word.

Leti immediately threw away her bloodstained dress and washed her hair and face with hot water and changed clothes. After that, the only thing left for her to do was to wait for the report. With nothing else to do, she sat in front of the chessboard and moved the white bishop, and then stared seriously at the board.

“I am certain his next move will be this, so...” Leti murmured as she tapped on the black rook when she felt a presence in her room. She looked at the window and...

“Your highness! I’ve come to be your guard in place of Senpai!”

“Haven’t I told you not to enter through the window? Do that again and I shall kick you out.”

Astrid silently opened the locked window and went inside the room. If anyone saw him coming in through the window, it would

definitely cause unpleasant rumours to circulate around the castle. For Leti, it was still too early for her to take the first step in becoming the Heartbreaker Queen.

“Any progress on the magic circle?” asked Leti.

“None yet, your highness. The Knights of the Round are currently asking the knights who prepared the area,” reported Astrid as he jumped into Leti’s room. Then he felt something was *strange* with Leti.

“Hmmm?” Astrid curiously looked at Leti and went close to her and the strangeness increased as he got closer. Before he could even think about the reason behind it, his body moved first. He bent down and brought his face near Leti’s beautiful, golden locks and breathed in its scent.

The gesture Astrid did was so dog-like that even Leti forgot to scold him for getting too close to her.

“What’s this smell...?”

“Blood? But I already washed my hair. Does it still smell?”

“No, it doesn’t smell like blood...it’s more like...a black scent...” Astrid said. He was feeling frustrated at finding the right word to describe the strangeness he felt when, his gaze slowly went down and met Leti’s gaze, who was looking at him waiting for his next words.

*Aaah...the colour of her highness's eyes are so beautiful...* Astrid thought as he was drawn in by Leti's steel blue eyes reminiscent of Sommevesle's winter skies, he moved closer and ...

“Ouch!”

“You mongrel!” cried Leti.

Astrid's head shook and firecrackers exploded in front of his eyes. He tightly held the back of his head, the spot where Leti mercilessly hit him with the Knight Sword.

“This is why I am sick of men! You are too materialistic! Do that again and I will pierce you with my twelve swords! Remember that!” scolded Leti.

“*Hububu...Please forgive me...but your highness is so beautiful and...but I'm serious!*”

“No one is asking that! Shall I tell you what it means to be a guard!? The guard is supposed to protect the master so it will be meaningless if the guard attacked the master he was supposed to protect!”

“Ah, that's right!”

Leti thought of the nickname for Astrid she heard from Duke and swore, *this stupid naïve knight!* She said to herself that her hot cheeks were because of anger and not because she was blushing.

“Anyway, it is done and over. Now go outside and guard there. Switch with Duke when he arrives,” ordered Leti.

“...Is Duke-Senpai allowed inside your room, your highness?”

“Yes. Duke is not a *man* but a *knight*. Now go.” Leti said as she pointed out the door for Astrid to go out.

Astrid obediently said yes and went out of Leti's room.

“Did I make her highness cautious of me? I'd better be careful next time.”

*Now, back to work!* Astrid switched back to work mode when he finally remembered the word he was searching a while ago.

“It's impurity!”

The Sword of White Light held purification abilities and that responded to the impurities in Leti's hair. She already washed out the blood but the impurities were still there.

“That small amount should disappear in a few days so I guess it's fine but...*will her highness allow me to touch her hair if I said I'll purify it? Probably not...not after what I tried to do.* Astrid sighed dejectedly.

Later in the afternoon, just when Leti's anger towards Astrid's action had subsided, Leonhardt, who was called to investigate the magic circle, and Duke came to the Royal Villa.

For reports like this, there was a proper order on how it should be done. The first person who should give the report was the leader of the investigation, which in this case was Duke, a knight from the Royal Chivalric Order who was leading the investigation, but Leonhardt ignored this protocol and proceeded to report the information to his older sister Leti.

“First, the magic circle. This is most likely one of those magic circles drawn in some old book on curses.”

Leonhardt handed a paper with an identical copy of the circle to Leti. She took a look and agreed that it was, obviously. A star of instability drawn with blood was so cliché that it lost the ability to be scary at all.

“There are still books about the lost arts of the past, books on *magic* that exist today. But following the procedures religiously does not guarantee it will give the desired effect. I know, for I’ve been trying these out day and night.”

Leon believed that there would always be an occult belief that would persist no matter what era it might be. But Leti, knowing about the past as the Knight King’s reincarnation, had a different opinion.

In the past, there existed not a *God* but *gods* and together with them were mythical creatures, like spirits and fairies. *Magic*, a mysterious power, was persistent throughout the lands. But that was then. Magic and anything related to it had long since gone that

even the fact that it once existed was forgotten and the only traces left were fairy tales, myths, and pointless superstitions.

*The source of magic, the gods, had abandoned this world. The final god left wanted to be human and so here I am, thought Leti.*

Humans were the ones who erased magic from history but there were still some fragments left. They were not able to get rid of it completely.

“Next is this one. The characters written round the pentagram is ‘Archaic Hellas’, or more specifically, a language older than archaic Hellas, archaic Hellas’ mother language. And the person who wrote this is most likely not familiar with it.”

Leon pointed out one character written around the pentagram.

“Take, for example, this word. There should be a full stop in writing this at the upper right section but the writer did not stop and continued the stroke. This shows that the person who wrote this did not know it’ll be a different word if the stroke was continuous and curved. This is what happens when people simply try to copy what they see.”

Archaic Hellas was a dead language with only the writing system left intact. This language was sometimes used in old scriptures and a handful of scholars studied it to use for research. Leonhardt was one of them.

“‘Severed from the Cycle of Life; forbidden to enter the Kingdom in Heaven; be nothing but a consciousness wandering over this land for all eternity’ was probably what this would mean if it was written correctly. It was probably a curse to make someone a ghost forever but became meaningless due to the incorrect strokes. How unfortunate...ahahaha. Anyway, I shall confirm this with scholars of archaic Hellas and report again,” said Leonhardt.

“So the criminal does not know archaic Hellas,” Leti sighed, feeling relieved that the criminal was from present time and not a ghost energy who would definitely know archaic Hellas for it existed long ago in the past. But there were still questions left unanswered.

*I know who you truly are.*

Leti thought this message pertained to her secret as the Knight King so the criminal was someone who knew her secret. But how? And what was the reason behind the curse? Now that she was certain the criminal was not ghost energy, the answers to these questions became harder to find.

“So to summarise, based on the current information, we can say that the criminal is someone who has access to an old book about magic and curses and is not familiar with archaic Hellas. *Hahaha...* There’s too many who can fit this description. Any noble can enter and borrow a book from the Royal Library. Knights of

the Order and Scholars can as well as long as they have permission or it can also be anyone working for a noble family and was sent for an errand,” Leonhardt summed up.

It was like saying everyone inside the castle grounds were suspects. It would be impossible to interview the suspects even if every Knight in the Order was deployed.

“Anything else?” asked Leti.

“One last thing. I’m curious about this number ‘T’. If it was written there intentionally, then it means there’d be a number ‘II’ or even ‘III’.”

“So are you saying that there will be another one?”

“Yes. The more it happens, the more clues we’ll get. So for the sake of catching the criminal, let’s hope there is another one. Besides, curses cannot kill anyone. Even intricate ones like this.”

Anyone who saw the circle would only feel unpleasant or uneasy, nothing more, nothing less. So the best course of action for now was to wait for the enemy’s next move, just as what Leonhardt had said.

“Do you have any idea who is the target, your highness?” asked Duke who had not uttered a word since his return.

Any one of the three eldest royal children was a possible target of the curse. But Leonhardt had a different idea. Maybe the curse was not for a particular person but a certain group of people.

“How about considering someone who hates the ‘Royal Family?’”

The term ‘Royal Family’ in Sommevesle refers to the King, his immediate family, and his relatives – the Dukes and their respective families. Members of the royal family all have rights to the throne, regardless of their sex. However, there is no clear order of succession established within the kingdom.

“If we trace the roots of the current bloodline, we shall arrive to The Revolution King Julius’ line. It is true that the current line is not directly connected to the Knight King, but not wholly unrelated...That is not a bad idea. Let us consider that possibility as well,” said Leti.

There were foolish nobles who thought their bloodlines were closer to the Knight King’s than the current line.

Now that they had decided to wait for the next move, Leonhardt excused himself, saying that he also had to report to the Order as well.

“Your highness, did something happen with Astrid?”

“What is the matter?”

“He looked dejected.”

Leti was impressed at how observant Duke was.

“He did something stupid so I called him a mongrel. You should discipline your junior properly. For his first lesson, maybe you should teach him ‘stay’.”

Leti ended the conversation there and Duke did not ask anything else.

The conversation about the incident was over but not for Leti who sneaked out of her room once night came.

Leti secretly dropped one of her earrings at the scene during the day before she left to change her clothes. With this, the preparation for her perfect excuse was now complete. If anyone found her there, she could easily tell them that she went there to search for the pair of her favourite earring.

Leti, with her night vision thanks to the Sword of Black Darkness, did not need a lamp. However, it was too unnatural to walk outside in the dark without it so she simply carried one without lighting it up. Besides, the light would only call attention.

“...I see it was erased already,” sighed Leti as she reached the training ground where the circle was drawn. The remains of the sacrificial bird and the magic circle drawn with blood were already cleaned up. She wanted to see the message ‘I know who you truly are’ again personally, but it was no longer possible.

“Well then, let us go home. I feel like Duke will find me here if I stay any longer,” Leti said as she slowly stood up, feeling a little bit disappointed. Then she saw light coming closer to her direction. Leti gulped. The person approaching may be someone working in the castle or a Knight of the Order going on patrol. Whichever it might be, both meant trouble for her.

“...Leticia!?”

But the person was neither of the two.

“Prince Guido!? Why are you here?” said a surprised Leti.

“I should ask you the same? What you doing here alone at this time of the night?” said Guido.

“I just noticed I lost my favourite earring so I am in the middle of searching for it. But the lamp had died so I was already planning to go back.” Leti smoothly said her prepared excuse.

“You should’ve just asked your maid to do it for you. Go home now.”

“I cannot possibly ask her to go to the place where a magic circle drawn in blood was at this time of the night...But how about you? What are you doing here alone? Did you also lose an earring?”

“No. ‘Tis because of a different matter. Come, I’ll walk you to the Royal Villa.” Guido said. He clearly did not have any plans on sharing.

Leti decided to let it pass and go back home when,  
“Who’s there!” shouted a voice.

Leti and Guido looked at each other when they heard the sharp voice. They were thinking of the same thing. If someone saw them, the most likely reason they would come up with was that Princess Leticia and Prince Guido had something to talk about and no one should know about it. Now, if this information reached the Lauensteins, they might think the worse and the world would simply find the corpses of the two royal children together the next morning.

“Stay still.” Guido said to Leti as he quickly took off his coat, used it cover Leti’s head, and then embraced her.

*Ah, I see. But if he does this...* Leti thought. Bad rumours would definitely go around about Guido.

“Who’s there? Answer me!” The voice and the sound of footsteps came closer.

“...P-prince Guido!?” The person calling out was a knight from the Order who was on patrol and could not hide his surprise at finding who was there.

Leti, who could not see anything, deduced that there were two knights based on the footsteps but only one of them had spoken.

“Go! And do not tell anyone about this,” warned Guido.

“Yes, your highness!”

A prince embracing a lady, most likely not his fiancée—what the knights saw as a clear act of an *affair*. While Leti was thinking they were doing injustice to Guido’s fiancée, the other knight spoke.

“Prince Guido, please pardon me. But would you be so kind as to escort the *young lady back to her home*? Please do not let her out of your sight.”

Leti swallowed her shock.

The voice belonged to Duke and it was a tone lower than his normal voice. He already knew that Guido’s fake lover was none other than his master, even though he had not seen her face.

The knights left the prince and his lady and the two separated once they could no longer hear the footsteps of the knights.

“Looks like Duke noticed.”

“...He is...unnecessarily sharp. I am certain I will get a scolding tomorrow.” Leti sighed as she was already desperately thinking of an excuse to tell Duke. He might believe her if she told him she had something to discuss privately with Guido but that was not the point. Duke would not scold her for that. He would be scolding her for going out alone.

“Leticia, are you...” Guido hesitantly called out to Leti who was still looking down, busy coming up with her excuse. But when

she looked up, Guido decided not to continue what he was about to say and simply said, “I will walk you home.”

When they reached the Royal Villa, Guido finally spoke and asked Leti if Leonhardt was home.

“Do you need something from Leon? Wait here. I shall get him for you,” *as thanks for sending me home*, finished Leti.

Leti went to get Leonhardt and persuaded him to meet Guido and passed her younger brother to her older brother.

*But if he originally meant to meet with Leon, there was no need for him to pass through the Order's Camp. And why would he go alone?* Leti wondered at Guido's actions.

This only meant that he was going to do something he did not want even his knights, Valkyrie, to know about.

*An affair? No, no, no. That is the most unlikely reason for him.*

What about the person who drew the circle?

*Maybe he came back again to check the scene...* Leti sighed at how foolish her thoughts were.

“Ane'ue<sup>2</sup>, there is no need to prepare for a room. We shall talk here.”

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<sup>2</sup> Ane'ue: A Japanese honorific for calling one's older sister. (More formal and old-fashioned than the normal *Onee-san*)

Leti's thoughts were interrupted by Leonhardt's obviously irritated voice.

"Is that so?" asked Leti, looking at Guido for confirmation. He nodded and Leti left them alone.

As soon as Leti's footsteps could no longer be heard, Leonhardt directly asked Guido what his purpose was.

"I came to ask you about the magic circle."

"Could you not wait for the report from the Order tomorrow? I'm surprised Valkyrie even allowed you to come here alone. *Ahaha.*"

Leonhardt brought out a copy of the report for Guido to read. Guido scanned the report and asked if they had any particular suspects.

"Someone who hates the royal family? I mean the three eldest royal children were targeted so I am thinking it's somewhere along that line. Besides, Ane'ue also thinks some foolish noble is behind it."

"...Royal family," whispered Guido.

Leonhardt thought Guido would agree with him so he waited for his agreement but the pause made him think Guido might have

another idea. He was about to ask him about it when Guido handed back the report to him.

“Sorry for disturbing you this late. I shall excuse myself.”

“Why, thank you. And please don’t come here ever again,” Leonhardt said that with a perfect smile, complete with a waving hand. He was about to return to his own room when he saw a black figure...no, a black hand over Guido’s shoulders caressing his back. Leonhardt took off his glasses to check if it was not his imagination and hurriedly ran after Guido.

“Wait! Ani’ue<sup>3</sup>! On your...shoulder!?” Leonhardt said, panting for breath despite running only for a short distance.

“What?”

“There was a black hand...huh?”

The black hand disappeared at that moment when Leonhardt had bent down a little to catch his breath.

“Huh? There was a black hand on your shoulder a while ago...” Leonhardt repeated.

“A black hand?” Guido asked, completely clueless as to what Leonhardt was saying.

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<sup>3</sup> Ani’ue. A Japanese honorific referring to one’s older brother (More formal and old fashioned than the normal *Onii-san*)

Leonhardt tilted his head to the side, wanting to ask Guido what the hand was when,

“...ahaha?”

“What’s with that reaction?”

Guido paused and then laughed. Leonhardt forgot his normal manner of speaking and asked Guido with a plain “What?” in a low voice.

“I thought it was a joke so I laughed. Leticia taught me in our previous tea party that jokes are fundamental in smoothing out communication with other people so I should at least respond with a smile or laugh,” explained Guido.

“Oh. I. See. But unfortunately I cannot even feint and be like your fiancée who finds your eccentricity cute,” said Leonhardt, trying to suppress the worst annoyance he had ever felt in his life.

This prime-minister-type of a prince could easily pick up satiric and sarcastic remarks and could even return those with twice or thrice the damage, but he never understood the workings of a joke.

“Ani’ue, you benefit a lot from your face, do you not?”

Yes, this was all because of his extremely handsome cool face. No doubt it was because of this that everyone ended up interpreting his words with a meaningful sentiment when in fact he did mean it to be that way. If he could just act a little bit like the

carefree and foolish junior of Duke, his image would be a little different.

“But do we not look the same?”

“Yes, we do, but the impressions we give are different.” *That's why I hate you,* whispered a fed up Leonhardt.



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# OKOBORE HIME

## TO

# ENTAKU NO KISHI

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*The Leftover Princess and the Knights of the Round*

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*Book II: A Queen's Conditions*

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Story by: Riine Ishida

Art by: Ichiko Okiya

**Characters:**



**Leticia**

“Leftover Princess”

First Princess of Sommevesle, heir to the throne

Already knew that she would be the next queen



**Duke Barchet**

Knight of Sixth Rank of the Royal Chivalric Order

Rumored to have the best skills within the Order

The receiving end of Leti's high-handed invitation



**Leonhardt**

Leti's younger brother

Third Prince of the Kingdom of Sommevesle

An eccentric historian

**Friedhelm**

First Prince of the Kingdom of Sommevesle  
Leti's eldest half brother  
A prince of charm and charisma

**Guido**

Second Prince of the Kingdom of Sommevesle  
Leti's second oldest half brother  
A Prime Minister-type of prince with his detailed planning and organized executions

**Astrid Gale**

Knight of Tenth Rank of the Royal Chivalric Order  
Duke's junior

# Okobore Hime to Entaku no Kishi

*Credits page/Translator's notes*

Brought to you by:

[AQUA Scans](#)

Credits:

- ❖ Raws: Icarus Bride
- ❖ Translation: Crystal Hikari
- ❖ Proofreading: Scylla
- ❖ Quality Checking: Mizououji

Translator's note:

The Japanese honorifics were kept in the translation of the dialogues of the characters to show the respect or adoration shown by the characters. Footnotes were provided upon the first appearance of the honorific in the chapter to explain it.

Thoughts are signified by *italics*.

The titles for this volume are all based on chess terminologies.



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CHAPTER II TOUCH AND MOVE

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Three days after the magic circle incident, Leti was holding a one-on-one lesson in her room.

“To be the knight of the First Seat of the Knights of the Round bears an important meaning. The honorary knights of the king are different to other honorary knights because they have military powers. Special mention has to be given to the First Seat knight because he has the authority to give orders as the King’s representative. In other words, instead of a knight, you are more like the highest ranking general in the country.”

An army under the name of the Royal Chivalric Order and a group of military officers collectively known as the Knights of the Round - these are the two forces responsible for Sommevesle to be recognized as a superpower by the world. If it wasn’t for this, there was no reason for the kingdom to keep the budget-eating Order during this time of peace.

“I get that part, but what about all these books and papers?” Duke said while looking at the books written in languages he didn’t know and the stacks of paper completely filled with text.

Leti tapped on the books with her fingers and said in reply, “The magic circle incident shall be put on hold for now. We cannot do anything but wait for the next one. Therefore, while we wait, I shall have you use that time to do some studying. Now that you know what these are all about, let us proceed.

For the other countries, our knight system is nothing of importance. The Royal Chivalric Order is simply what we call our army and you, as the First Seat Knight, are seen as ‘the Honourable General’. So I shall teach you the knowledge you will need for that position.”

The First Seat Knight’s duty was not only protecting the king. That was one reason why Leti chose Duke for the position. Duke, being part of the nobility, had already received the compulsory education as a gentleman so there was no need for her to teach him everything. She would be crowned in a few years’ time and that was not enough to teach an illiterate knight how to read and write and to instil in him proper etiquette.

“First, completely memorize the social map of Sommevesle. Remember the relationship between the

families. After that, memorize the other countries' social map. While you are at it, better learn how to speak at least two more foreign languages."

Duke nodded in understanding without even letting out a complaint. If Leti said so, then he truly needed all that knowledge as the First Seat Knight. Besides, if he, as a representative of Sommevesle, could not even greet the generals of other countries properly, then they would surely not be taken seriously.

"These books over here are the ones I used for my studies. They are good references so you can use them for yours. Read them over and over whenever you have time."

"How many languages can you speak, Your Highness?"

"I can speak three languages at a native level, enough for me to tell jokes and three more with fluency, enough to hold casual conversations and a few more to say greetings."

"...Amazing."

Duke suddenly remembered his friend's performance during foreign language classes back at the Knight Academy. Friedhelm always seemed bored and sleepy during the classes but still got perfect marks on their tests and assignments. Duke sometimes found himself wondering how Friedhelm did it. Now, he seemed to have found the answer. Friedhelm did not get high grades because he was particularly good in the subject, but rather it was something he had already learned as a part of the royal family; it was expected of him.

“Leon is more amazing. At thirteen, he was already being asked to do the final confirmations of terminology books written in different languages. There is a proper reason why he can do as he pleases – he has a true value as a member of the royal family. If he was just a fool, then he would have been long given to the church and tasked to pray for the kingdom every day.”

Leonhardt could do whatever he wanted because of his eccentricity. He might look like that, but he had his own share of difficulties and gave his best effort to be of help. Duke now learnt about it and this improved his impression of the unique prince.

“To be honest, I originally wanted Leon to teach you, but his hands already seem full with his teaching positions at the Knight Academy and the University so I decided to do it myself. Besides, having a lady teach might actually motivate you to study better, at least for the sake of your ego.”

“...Lady?”

“Yes. Have you forgotten?” Leti asked, but there was no trace of offence in her demeanour.

“Ah, no. It’s just that you’re more of my master and...”

“Good, I do not mind at all. I do not see you as a man as well. If I did, I would have a maid stand in here as chaperone.”

Leti suddenly remembered the ‘mongrel incident’ with Astrid. Being alone with Duke, her knight, was fine but not with Astrid.

“A maid...now that you mention it, why don’t you have a lady’s maid?”

“I had two before but after I was chosen as the heir, the one from Guido’s faction turned white and resigned on her own. I fired the other one from Friedhelm’s after she served me tea while her hands were shaking violently. Searching for someone I can trust is too much work so I only have maids for now.”

Leti’s comment before that the brutal ones were those around her was true. Moreover, the conditions for Leti’s lady’s maid - a lady of high social rank, of character, and of neutral standing, that could pass Leti’s meticulous eyes, were probably difficult to satisfy.

“A party will be held soon in celebration for the birthday of my younger sister. Until then remember at least everything about the kingdom’s social hierarchy. I suggest starting first with the families under the Guido faction since your family belongs to it. Studying that may be comparatively easier.”

Leti proceeded in teaching Duke the things he should know one after the other and cut the day’s lessons at a good point.

“And one last thing. An assignment for you,” Leti said as she handed Duke a sheet of paper.

The paper contained a list of the positions in Sommevesle, such as the Knights of the Round and the Commander of the Order. Written on the other side were the corresponding positions in other countries, such as Marshall and General.

“This is a comparative list of the different ranks and positions of Sommevesle and our neighboring countries. Make sure to remember everything, even the smallest details. It will be rude to make any mistakes. Once you have perfectly memorized those, I shall teach you about their insignia and shoulder marks.”

If Leti could teach Duke that much, then it simply meant that she had studied and memorized all of those herself. Duke somehow found it frustrating that the people did not even have any idea about Leti’s efforts. If they knew about it, then his master would have never been branded as a ‘Leftover Princess’.

“I remember you are good at remembering people’s faces, but take this piece of advice based on my

experience. You should learn to remember people aside from their faces. Women, for example, can use cosmetics to change how they look. Have you ever seen your previous lover's face without any makeup?"

"...No."

Leti looked like she had something to say but decided to keep her silence, out of either kindness, disappointment, pity, or all of the above.

"Do you put on makeup as well, Your Highness?"

"Yes, but only a little. I am beautiful already so there is no need to put much on. Tell me, am I wearing anything on my lips today?"

Duke stared at Leti's face, trying to discern whether she had any coloring on her lips. He never took notice if Leti wore makeup on a daily basis, but he was certain she had worn one for the party. He tried to recall her face that night and then compared it to her current look.

"You...don't?"

“You better pay closer attention to women then. I am using a lighter shade.” Leti took Duke’s thumb and pressed it to the corner of her lips. He looked at his thumb and there was indeed a pretty shade of light pink on it. Leti jokingly said to him that he has another assignment.

“Take your time in doing those assignments, no need to rush and remember everything all at once. You have all the time to study until my coronation. Another advice, do not even try to remember two languages under the same language tree at the same time. You will just confuse yourself. And...”

A knock cut Leti’s words and a maid informed them that Leti has a visitor.

“Your Highness, Lady Eleanor of Aufrecht House wishes to see you.”

“Eleanor? It is unusual for her to come unannounced.”

Leti thought Eleanor’s business might be important so she decided to meet her in her private room instead.

She asked the maid to clear the desk and gave Duke the books for him to study.

“Do you know Lady Eleanor?”

“She is Prince Guido’s fiancée, right?”

Duke, though not actively using his affiliation as a Barchet, still knew the basic information of the other families under the Guido faction. Leti thought of introducing him to Eleanor if he did not know her, but since he did, there was no need for it and she ended their lesson for the day.

Eleanor Aufrecht entered the room when Duke took his leave. Eleanor is the daughter of Lord Aufrecht, a marquis under Guido. Leti had previous interactions with her as she would be her future older sister and had established a good relationship with her since then.

Eleanor’s chestnut hair and aquamarine eyes exuded a more gentler and softer aura, compared to Leti’s sharp and striking beauty.

“Eleanor, how have you been? I last saw you at the ball hosted by the Lauensteins.”

Leti welcomed Eleanor with her perfect princess smile, but Eleanor returned it with a forced one and immediately looked down.

“Leti, I do not know what I should do.”

“Take a seat first. I am all ears.” Leti said with a sweet voice as if cooing the seemingly distressed Eleanor. The situation might indeed be serious.

“We...Prince Guido and I, were talking about our...future and then...” Eleanor cried. This surprised Leti. She immediately went to her friend’s side, held her hand and asked what was wrong.

“Prince Guido suddenly told me...he told me...he wanted to break off the engagement!”

“Break off?” *Why now?* Leti found the timing to be too suspicious.

The engagement between Guido and Eleanor had long been official and the only thing left was for them to make their vows. The only reason why their wedding was delayed was because of Guido’s mother, the late Sofia, was against it. According to rumours, Sofia did not like

Eleanor. Leti also remembered hearing her saying “...anyone else but Eleanor,” with a stern look on her face.

“Has he made an official request to your father?”

“No, not yet. He still has not said anything to Papa... It was more of a slip of the tongue, but...”

“I wonder why...the last time I talked to Prince Guido, he even said he was sorry for delaying the marriage for so long.”

Guido’s opinion on marriage was the same as Leti’s. They would prioritize their positions first over love. Leti thought that Guido found the marriage with Eleanor advantageous for both families and the only reason why he kept it ambiguous was his mother. Besides, he did not seem to hate the union at all, so why?

*...An affair?*

Leti remembered seeing Guido alone at night during the night of the magic circle incident. Even so, she could not imagine him, the cool and nearly cold Guido, doing something as passionate as an affair. He was a logical man who could easily pickup sarcastic remarks and reply with

twice the damage and yet he could not comprehend a pleasant joke. He was not a warm person who could easily form relationships.

“Dear Eleanor, it has only been two months since Queen Sofia passed away. He might have said it out of confusion. Please stay with him until he has calmed down. Support him as his fiancée, his future wife.”

Leti carefully chose her words to calm Eleanor. For now, this was what she could do. Interrogating Guido and investigating about this matter had to be saved for later.

“Is that so? I was really worried he has come to hate me.”

“No, there is no reason for you to be hated. You are a wonderful lady.”

Leti continued on listening to Eleanor and assured her that everything will be all right. By the time Eleanor was cheered up, the sun had nearly set and their shadows had already grown longer. Eleanor told Leti she would try

to invite Guido to watch a play and left Leti's room with a smile.

“...this has become complicated,” whispered Leti.

The room, now devoid of visitors, was silent. Leti took a seat in front of the chessboard and stared at the pieces while contemplating Eleanor's story.

“Prince Guido having an affair? No. It is more probable that he is having a hard time accepting Queen Sofia's death, but still...” Leti mused as she idly fiddled with the chess pieces.

“I did think he was grieving but I did not expect it to affect him this much...”

The rational Guido blurted out something he did not mean. If this indeed happened, then his sadness might be deeper than Leti originally thought. Maybe it was about time to give her brother a visit.

“Call Duke and also prepare flowers for Queen Sofia,” Leti ordered her maid who followed immediately, already knowing what should be done.

Leti's maid prepared her outdoor clothes and shoes, and helped her change. By the time her preparations were finished, Duke was already standing outside her room, carefully holding the flowers arranged for the deceased queen.

“We shall pay a visit first to Queen Sofia's grave and then make a call to Prince Guido.”

Leti thought on how long it had been since she went out of her way to meet Guido out of sisterly affection. Up until now, she had been acting out of her duties as the First Princess and simply chided Guido whenever he and Friedhelm would start a fight. Now, she felt something was changing between them as compared to the time when she had lost all hopes for their relationship.

*If this continues, I think I can give a positive answer to my assignment.*

“How much shall we be on good terms?”<sup>1</sup>

Leti understands that it would be impossible for the three of them to go back the way they used to be. But the

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<sup>1</sup> See the prologue for details.

current situation was a whole lot better than the time when she thought she'd get the crown at the expense of her brothers.

Leti was able to accomplish both of her goals at the same time. Guido happened to be giving his mother a visit in the North Cemetery so Leti did not have to look for him. She was somehow surprised to see him there, standing by Queen Sofia's grave, but she still walked silently and stood beside him.

“Truth be told, I did not expect to see you here.” Leti said as she knelt down, gently placed the flowers she brought on the ground and offered a silent prayer for the late queen.

“I see you come here quite often. I’ve seen the same flowers before.”

“And that means you come here just as often...There is something I want to talk about. Could you spare some time?”

“Sure.”

“It is a bit difficult to talk about it in front of Queen Sofia. Let us go somewhere else.”

Leti walked further into the cemetery and Guido listlessly followed her. Duke and Guido's knights followed a few steps behind them.

“I just had a talk with Eleanor...and she told me that you, after all this time, are being hesitant about your marriage. Is it true?”

“...Yes.”

Guido knew about Eleanor's good relationship with Leti so he had already expected Eleanor to consult with Leti and Leti, in turn would question him. He was about to give his prepared answer when Leti asked something he did not expect.

“Are you alright?”

Guido faced Leti. Their eyes, sharing the same steel blue colour, met but his was evidently filled with confusion—confusion as to what was the meaning behind Leti's question.

“I thought at first that the reason why you are cancelling off your engagement was because of an affair. But seeing you like this and how frequent you come here, I am certain you do not even have the heart to think about it.”

Guido was surprised to hear the word affair. His expression did not hint anything about his surprise but the fact that he was silent and did not immediately reply to Leti’s question, laced with a tinge of joke, was proof enough that he did not expect this.

“I see. There was that option...” Guido softly whispered.

Leti heard this and felt relieved to know that even the mere thought of having an affair did not cross his mind.

“Only two months have passed since Queen Sofia passed away. All this time I thought you were all right. Queen Sofia’s health was already declining for some time and you were perfectly calm during the funeral services. I really thought you were doing fine.”

Leti’s beautiful face slowly closed in to Guido’s.

“You look a little worn out. Prince Friedhelm was also worried about you. You should take a rest. Sometimes, you think you are alright but truthfully you are not.”

Leti’s ‘are you alright?’ was not a question for Guido to answer, but rather words of sympathy coming from a worried sister.

“If you have any complaints, try talking about those with Eleanor. She may seem quiet but she has a strong heart. I am certain she will be your support.”

“I know, she’s too good for me,” Guido said as his normally cold facade softened a little.

Leti stopped digging deeper into the issue. That was the furthest she could go as his sister. Anywhere further was Eleanor’s, his fiancée’s, turf.

“We will go back now. But you should take your time,” Leti said as she turned back on her heels and gave her signal to Duke who was standing a few paces away.

“Bishop to D6.”

Leti turned back again to face Guido, her expression was somewhere in between shock and displeasure with what Guido said.

“I guess you truly are alright. You should at least try to feign weakness and choose a poor move when you are down.” Leti said with a tinge of relief evident in her voice. She turned her back again and continued on walking without saying another word.

“Hey, I also remember you saying Bishop something before. Is it a code of sorts?” Duke asked as they walked back to the castle. He decided to ask something different to Leti instead of trying to find out what the royal siblings talked about.

“When Queen Sofia passed away, I invited him to a game of chess once everything had calmed down. So we alternately give our moves every time we see each other.”

Guido did not mind playing a game and accepted Leti’s invitation and suggested this playing style, which could take months to finish.

Guido taught Leti how to play chess, whereas Friedhelm taught Guido. The three of them used to play the game together with Leti and Friedhelm sometimes teaming up to conspire a plan on how to defeat the invincible Guido.

“The one who loses the game will have to expose one of their weaknesses.”

“Is that promise alright? Isn’t that dangerous?”

“Yes, of course, it is alright. We are both aware that this is just a simple game. If I win, I would just ask him to tell me one dish he hates.”

They were walking on the path covered with ivy-lined walls leading to the usually peaceful Royal Villa, but what they saw upon their arrival was far from peaceful.

Leti’s normally calm maid went scampering towards them and cried, “Your Highness! Thank goodness you’re safe, but your mother’s, Her Majesty’s white lilies...”

Leti asked her maid what had happened. After hearing the gist of the situation, she immediately went to the site of the case with speed unbelievable for a woman.

The site was located in the eastern part of the castle, the place where the First and Second Queen Consorts took care of white lilies.

Leti stood from a distance to observe the scene. There were knights from The Order already there and some passers-by gathered to see the commotion. She checked on the scene by peeking through the gaps in between the people in the crowd.

What was supposed to be a beautiful bed of lilies filled with white flowers swaying in the wind was now a wreck of scattered and tattered petals with a bloody magic circle drawn on it and in the centre of the circle was a cat's dead body.

“Mother and Queen Sofia’s lilies! Who could do such a thing...?” Leti cried upon seeing the horrible sight. Duke was readily behind her and supported her as she nearly fainted from the shock at seeing what had happened. Leti, the delicate princess was deeply hurt at the savagery done to her late mother’s lilies. Or so she wanted them all to see because Duke knew for a fact that behind this act, his master was fuming with rage and he could easily imagine

himself doing anything necessary to pacify a raging Leti later.

“Your Highness, let’s leave this matter to The Order for now. This scene is not fit for your eyes.”

Leti nodded and followed Duke as he led her away from the horrendous sight.

Leti continued on her frail and meek princess act for as long as there were people to see it. However, the moment they were out of the Royal Palace and near her villa, she dropped it. She stomped her feet as they walked to her room and let her anger explode the second Duke closed the door to her private room.

“This is unheard of! You sure have the guts to fight me! I accept your challenge! I’ll catch you and crush you with everything this kingdom has! Charging you with treason is not enough!”

Leti revealed her true self. She punched the wall with all her might as she said this. Her movements all seemed so natural and fluid, from the flow to the exertion of force. Duke didn’t need to ask if she had done this before.

Chapter II: Touch and Move



Her actions spoke of it. The supposedly meek and gentle princess had been punching walls to vent her anger for a long time.

“It’s not yet clear that you are really the target. If we’re going to base it on this latest attack, the only clear thing is that the target is the royal family and...”

“But I, the heir to the throne, *is* the face of the royal family! ‘Tis the same as picking a fight with me!”

“Well, you have point.”

*How dare they do that to Queen Sofia’s lilies!*

Leti silently swore as the cruel sight played back in her mind.

“I must say this came as a surprise. I thought that the second circle would also be discovered somewhere where many people gathered. Just like the tournament.” Duke stated.

The second circle was drawn in blood on a bed of flowers, at its centre was a cat’s dead body, scattered around it were plucked petals of white lilies and beside it

the sentence 'I know who you truly are', also written in blood.

*Is the royal family really the target? There is still a possibility that I am targeted as an individual. It is not a secret that those lilies are the ones I bring with me when I visit Mother.*

For Leti, this incident showed how much she was looked down on as the Crown Princess. And she did not bother suppressing her anger about it.

"I also heard there were no clues found for this incident as well. It's the same as the last one, a daring act delivered with utter care and caution."

Duke asked for information from a knight of The Order nearby while they were at the scene. Unfortunately, he got nothing of importance, and just a confirmation of the only thing they knew about the perpetrator – that finding him, or her, or them would be difficult.

But Leti, though fuming with anger, kept a clear head and was able to observe the scene properly and found a clue.

“There is a clue in this second circle. There are two people involved. The petals scattered around the circle were plucked in two different ways. Some of the petals were carefully plucked out and some were recklessly torn. This means that one of them may be the brain behind this while the other one was not interested.”

Leti might have put on an exaggerated act when she saw the violated flowerbed, but while she was being dramatic, she was also keenly observing every detail, including the petals scattered around the circle. This was one of Leti's strongest weapons, a woman's eyes providing her a point of view different from a man's. Men would normally focus on the gruesome things, such as the bloody circle and the cat's corpse, but Leti was able to see the minute detail in the difference of the petals.

“Then that means the pair is composed of a mastermind and an accomplice. The mastermind has to have some power over the accomplice to force him, or maybe her, to do something they do not want to do. My guess is that they can be a noble and their servant or knight. If we are going to go with this, then I think it is safe to say that the unaffiliated Knights of the Order

present during the tournament can be ticked off our list of suspects.”

The people in attendance during the first incident were nobles with their honorary knights as participants in the tournament, and unaffiliated knights of The Order who were helping to manage the event. If the latter were to be removed from the list, it would greatly reduce the number of suspects, but there were still too many of them left. Leti and Duke were already wishing for more more information when the perfect source for it entered the room.

“Ane’ue<sup>2</sup>! I’m back. Would you like some details on the second circle?” Leonhardt greeted as he peeked inside the room in his blood stained coat. The Order had once again asked for the help of the genius prince.

“You also went to check on it, right? There’s no need to hide it. Anyway, I think you would agree that this somehow came as a surprise. Well, we did expect seeing the number ‘II’, nothing unexpected about that.

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<sup>2</sup> Ane’ue: A Japanese honorific for calling one’s older sister. (More formal and old-fashioned than the normal *Onee-san*)

*Abahahaha.*” Leonhardt said with his usual bouncy manner of speaking.

The number ‘I’ was written on the first circle and the number ‘II’ on the second. The first offering was a bird and the second was a cat. Anyone with scant knowledge in the occult could understand the obvious logic behind the circles.

Leti knew what Leonhardt was pertaining to.

“Don’t you find it interesting that the offering got bigger this time?”

The cat was bigger than the bird. Why use a bigger offering?

“Well, you see this is a staple in the world of horror and occult. The offerings for each ceremony get bigger and bigger and bigger and at the final ceremony...”

“The offering is a human,” finished Leti.

“Yes, you’re right. Therefore, The Order is now putting this incident at top priority before anyone gets

hurt. They are planning to solve this before the third one comes up.”

“Your Highness, we should increase your guards. Make sure to have me or a knight from The Order with you at all times. Let them handle the investigation for this. We should notify Seventh Heaven and Valkyrie as well to focus on protecting their masters.”

Leti nodded her agreement to Duke and Leonhardt, and shared with them her thoughts.

“If I was the criminal, and my target is the Royal Family, my next opportunity will be on Cornelia’s birthday. There is no more obvious time than this. It would be best if we can forestall him on that event.”

The upcoming birthday of Cornelia, the Second Princess of Sommevesle, which Leti had kindly taken charge of the preparations, was the perfect opportunity to cause an uproar. Many of the princes and princesses and most of the nobles in the kingdom would be in attendance. It was truly the best time to make an attack if the target of the curse was truly the royal family.

“Leon, did you notice anything else? Anything you might even dismiss as trivial.”

“Hmmm...Well, I did meet Guido Ani’ue<sup>3</sup> at the scene. He was unusually persistent in asking me if I knew who the criminal is. I guess even he, the cool one, won’t stay put with Queen Sofia’s favourite white lilies sullied like that. He used to give those to his mother every year for her birthday.”

No one could blame the calm and collected Guido if he lost his cool in that situation. The situation would cause anger to anyone, to have a bloody curse circle drawn on a place dear to him.

Leti and Leonhardt were trying to justify Guido’s uncharacteristic display of emotion while Duke was trying to reconcile the knowledge he had on the relationship of the eldest royal siblings. He had always thought that they were on bad terms with each other but following the conversation he had heard, what he knew might be wrong.

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<sup>3</sup> Ani’ue. A Japanese honorific referring to one’s older brother (More formal and old fashioned than the normal *Onii-san*)

Two days after the discovery of the second circle, Duke had still yet to find an answer the question he had in mind since he heard Leti and Leon's conversation about Guido. He wanted to know about the childhood of the three eldest royal siblings but was hesitant to ask Friedhelm since he was one of the parties involved. So he decided to ask another person not involved in it but knew about it first-hand. Of course, he had to hand in the payment in advance.

“Thank you for helping me out~ these physical tasks are too much for my flimsy arms, ahahaha. By the way, is it alright for you to be away from Ane’ue?”

“Please, Your Highness, I honestly do not know how I should react to your joke. As for her highness, she is currently in a meeting so I have some free time before I have to fetch her.”

Duke, carrying a stack of books, was walking towards The Archives with Leonhardt, his chosen informant. He asked Leonhardt the question that had been bugging him for some time.

“How was her highness’ relationship with her older brothers when they were children and how about now?”

“Their relationship? I think they are close with each other ever since before, though the current situation has forced them to act otherwise.”

“Ever since before? Meaning they are on good terms until now?”

“Yes, yes. Even now. I even think that one of Ane’ue’s intention in hosting the previous tea party was to cheer up Guido ani’ue.

Duke knew that Friedhelm truly cared for Leti but he did expect that the same was true for Guido. He had always thought they were really on bad terms, just as the rumours said. Anyone would have thought so since they acted more like strangers to each other in public.

“My elder brothers are chained by the curse called the ‘bloodline-of-the-three-Grand-Marquises’. They have no choice but to distance themselves from each other for now. Well, it’s not like I do not understand the reason why their families would want to regain their place in the

royal family. I guess that is just how religion works. No matter how much people try to separate the church from state, they will always find those two entangled with each other. It is an interesting topic for research, you know. Ahahaha.”

According to the story, the Kingdom of Sommevesle was founded by her first king, the god Christian, also known as The Knight King. Therefore, the members of the royal family are descendants from the gods. This is what the Lauensteins, Eulenbergs, and Kleinschmidts wanted back. They wanted to restore the “Noble Pride” in their names.

“I somehow feel bad for Friedhelm ani’ue and Guido ani’ue. They have been pressured all their lives to be king. I sure am glad I was born from parents of royal blood. Oh, and for the record, I am NOT on good terms with my elder brothers...”

Leonhardt suddenly stopped in thought and then opened his mouth again.

“Wait. That’s wrong. We are not on bad terms with each other. It is more like I am not within their field of

vision. Yes, that's it. Well, I wouldn't want to be in it anyway. If I were, I'd be dead now. Murdered and it would be disguised as an accident. Ahahaha.”

Leonhardt was a prince mothered by the First Queen Consort Julienne. Technically, if the traditional line of inheritance was followed, he was the next in line to the throne, therefore the one most in danger. But with what happened now, Leti took Leonhardt's position and shouldered everything in his place. Duke realized this now and decided to be a better support for his master.

“... *uhmmmm* ... I wonder why... if anyone would ask me whether I hate or like you, I would say I like you... I mean, you do not look at Ane'ue with weird eyes and you are very professional with your duties.”

“Thank you, Your Highness.”

“But recently, I do not know why, but I feel annoyed whenever I see your face. Yes, especially that expression... I wonder why.... *ahahaha*”

Duke replied with a simple “I see,” as he was completely at a loss with what Leonhardt was thinking.

“Ah! I see! So that was it. It is that ‘I-understand-Leti-best’ look. Yes, yes, that is exactly it. Ahahaha Now that I’ve noticed it, you are now more on the hate side.”

Duke let out a deep, deep sigh. He should have known, that even Leonhardt was inflicted with that disease similar to lovesickness.

“Your Highness, please excuse my rudeness, but are you perhaps afflicted by a certain illness that makes one prioritize the ladies in the family over their own lovers?”

“Stop the jokes. I am already sixteen years old.”

“Yes, of course.” Duke was already feeling relieved when Leonhardt continued speaking.

“But if at sixteen and *it* still persists, then I think it is already incurable, right?”

“...Yes.”

“Anyway, I now know I hate you but let us be cordial with each other in front of Ane’ue. We are both mature adults, are we not? *ahaha*”

Leonhardt was just the same age as Astrid. Duke did not think he was qualified as an adult and wanted to say something back but decided to simply state his agreement instead. He had learned his lesson that rebutting just makes discussions last longer than necessary.

“Her highness’ brothers, younger or older, are all a pain in the neck...” whispered Duke as he returned the books to their shelves.

Duke already had an inkling that his friend, Friedhelm, also shared the same sickness as Leonhardt, and that he was only trying to hide it. It seems that the only sane royal brother was the serious Guido.

Leonhardt and Duke finished returning the books and were already going out of the archives when they saw Guido.

Leonhardt swiftly hid behind Duke and bid him goodbye.

“Well, I shall go now. Talking to Guido Ani’ue taxes me. See you~”

*Isn't it the other way around?* Duke thought but did not voice out since he was being the mature adult. Duke watched Leonhardt, who was already a few paces away, take a route different to where they passed through to go to The Archives. Then, he stood up properly, gave the approaching Guido the proper greetings, and bowed his head.

If Guido was here, it meant that the meeting was already finished and he had to fetch Leti. He was about to excuse himself and hurry when Guido stopped him.

“Can I talk to you for a while?”

“...With me, Your Highness?”

Duke did not have any idea as to what Guido would talk about with him. It is true that his family was under the Guido faction, but his family was near the tail end of the hierarchy and they personally only had one conversation with each other before. Duke decided to accept the invitation but he was on full alert and requested to the prince to keep it short.

While Guido and Duke were having their conversation, Leti, clueless as to why her knight was running late, was waiting for him in the meeting room.

“Oh, is Duke late?”

“I understand that he is still a knight of The Order. I do not mind if he is late for a while.”

“Yes, of course,” nodded Johannes Müller, the Commander of the Royal Chivalric Order and one of the attendees in the meeting. He is man in his mid-forties with a stately air but amiable and approachable personality. However, he was also a veteran knight hardened by experience and it is no joke that the black cape he had worn as the commander was once dyed red by the blood shed by his enemies.

“Your Highness seemed to have enjoyed the meeting.”

“No, I was certainly bored.”

Leti did not utter a word during the meeting but her eyes keenly observed the expressions of all those in attendance. Johannes knew about this and did not believe

Leti's expression of boredom and found her denial interesting.

Leti and Johannes had long been chess rivals because Leti had always relied the Order whenever she and Leon needed protection. This was quite peculiar, as most nobles disliked the company of knights of the Order because they have their own honorary knights.

“How is the investigation going for the most recent magic circle incident?”

There were no human victims yet due to the magic circle incidents or else it would have been discussed in the meeting earlier. However, it was evident that the circle was growing in scale since the second circle used a bigger offering. Leti thought since the Commander of the Order was already beside her, she might as well ask if there was any progress.

“I am truly sorry Your Highness but we have not gathered any new information since our previous report. But please, rest assured that we are doing our best for this case and the Order is putting utmost priority for your safety. Please be patient with us.” Johannes bowed deeply,

saying his apologies as he thought Leti's question was a reprimand.

“That was not meant to scold you. I simply wanted to know the status of the Order. In case you are short on men due to the ongoing investigation, and would not have enough to act as guards for Cornelia's birthday, I would ask father if he could lend me his Knights of the Round and maybe ask some more from Prince Guido's Valkyrie.”

“I am grateful for your kind consideration, Your Highness but you need not concern yourself. We have already lowered the priority for the investigation on the incident. It is still called an investigation but we are just getting statements from people inside the castle.” Johannes told Leti, an obvious attempt to hide his message that the Order is adequate and able to handle the situation and honorary knights would be unnecessary.

The relationship between the knights of the Royal Chivalric Order and honorary knights was as bad as usual.

“Oh, Prince Guido has also asked me again about this incident.”

“...Again?”

“Yes. He was quite persistent about this case as well. He has asked me several times about the previous incident too. Maybe he is worried about Princess Cornelia’s birthday party.”

“I see.” Replied Leti but she was not at all convinced with the reason Johannes gave her.

*I understand if he was concerned about this second circle since it involved Queen Sofia’s flower bed but for the first one...why? He seems to be paying too much attention to this incident on magic circles. And he does not even believe in curses.*

Maybe on that night of the first circle when she met Guido, he was not there because of a secret love affair, but to look at the magic circle again.

*If he went back to the scene just as a criminal would, too many things will not add up. It is completely meaningless for him to sully his beloved mother’s lilies and it is completely out of his character to rely on something so uncertain like a curse. He can easily hire an assassin to finish off anyone he wants to.*

Leti gave herself a small laugh as she found herself as well thinking too much about the magic circle. She pushed all her thoughts on the circles aside and thanked Johannes for giving her a truthful report.

“Your Highness, I have another piece of information. Duke shall be transferred to handle a minor post in the Order so that his tasks will be lighter. I shall advise him as well to use the free time he will gain to protect you.”

“What post?”

Originally, Duke should have quit the Order the moment he became Leti's knight but due to some circumstances in the Order and Leti's ulterior motive, he is still a part of it. However, he had to be assigned to a lesser post because there is an implicit rule in the Order that to pursue higher ranks, the knight should be unaffiliated. Now that Duke has a master, he was now disqualified from that career path.

“He shall be in charge of training the new members of the Order. Though I have a feeling this post will be more challenging than it has been in the previous years

because of the presence of one troublesome rookie. Anyway, it is the young one's role to bear such pains."

Leti immediately thought of a young redhead knight when Johannes mentioned 'troublesome rookie'.

*Is he referring to Astrid? If he already had him investigated, then I am certain he has probably figured out the truth.*

If the Commander had decided to keep Astrid and let Duke handle him and suffer doing so even after knowing about Astrid's past, then, truly, the Order's Commander is not someone to mess with.

"But are you busy as well Your Highness? Is it truly alright for you to let Duke stay with us?"

"Yes. Duke may have enough connections as a knight but his lateral connections within the noble world are nearly non-existent. He could use his position in the Order to build that up more and of course, he could gather more information this way."

Instead of warning off Leti on her plans to use the Order's information network, Johannes showed

generosity and happily welcomed her to use it as she pleased.

“Thank you. But I do feel a little bit sorry for taking away your future commander.”

“No, don’t be Your Highness. The Order will not at all be affected by the loss of one or two youngsters like him. It is rather my pleasure to let him go if he would be useful to you.”

Duke’s noble birth, clear mind, superior abilities and wide popularity among his colleagues made him the perfect next commander of the Order. But because Leti took him and he would have to resign in a few years meant that the Order would have to go back to the drawing board and search for their next commander. Despite all of that, Johannes gladly gave his blessing to Leti.

“If you say so, then just let me thank you for that. He was truly the only one I wanted to have no matter what.”

“*Hahaha...* to that I can totally agree.”

Leti let out a strained laugh and once again asked Johannes whether he also wanted Duke as his next commander but he strongly denied it again, probably because he had no plans on praising Duke openly.

“But I also feel sorry for him. He might have dreamt of becoming the commander and I took away that chance from him.”

“No, Your Highness. Don’t be sorry. Becoming the Commander of the Order is not something to be dreamt of.” Johannes clearly refuted Leti’s words.

“The highest ranks in the Order are all filled up by leftovers, those who were not chosen or wanted. On the front, we may act all mighty and brave saying that we are serving the country and our king, but deep inside, we are thinking of something else. The title ‘Commander’ is just another name to call someone with broken dreams.”

For everyone, the Commander was the knight all other knights respected. But Johannes said it was different.

“He and I are already enough to represent the supply of knights crushed by reality.” Johannes’ voice when he said this was heavy. Leti wanted to ask him more about this when Duke arrived.

“Your Highness, please excuse my tardiness.”

Johannes stood up upon hearing Duke’s voice.

“Well then, Your Highness, I shall leave the approaching youngster to your care. And for the upcoming birthday party, I hope you would consider placing another promising youngster by your side for additional protection. A good day, Your Highness.” He bowed and left the room after he gave Leti his words of encouragement.

Duke slightly bowed his head in salute to his commander and afterwards walked towards his master.

“Sorry for being late.”

“Do not worry. Johannes kept me company and I am aware that you still have your duties to the Order.”

“Well...actually, I was called on by Prince Guido on my way here and...and we talked and...” Duke’s expression showed that he was unsure whether he should tell Leti what his conversation with Guido was about.

“You do not have to force yourself. If it is sensitive, you do not have to tell me. You are under Guido’s faction and I understand you have your own circumstances. Besides I am not a narrow-minded lady who would get jealous because of your previous men.”

“Hey, quit choosing words that can cause a misunderstanding.”

Leti walked out of the meeting room. Duke followed behind her and started telling her about his conversation with Guido despite his hesitation.

“Prince Guido asked me to...to teach him how to have an affair.”

“An affair? He asked *you*?...Oh, I see.”

“Hey, what does the ‘I see’ means?”

“Your face. You see, your looks are very likable to women that they are the ones approaching you. If you wanted, having an affair or two would be a piece of cake to you. Therefore, it is quite logical to ask for lessons on infidelity from you. Do you understand?”

Leti easily understood the reason why Guido would choose Duke as his teacher on this particular subject but the reason behind why he would like to know how to have an affair was a complete mystery. She tilted her head on one side and the only conclusion she could come up with was this might be one of *those*.

“It might have been one of Prince Guido’s infamous jokes.”

“Could you please explain it to me in layman’s terms? I don’t see where the joke is.”

“Sorry to disappoint but I do not see where it is either. Let me share with you a childhood story.

One day, the four of us where having a nice cup of tea and Leon said that I would only be marrying someone

that is more beautiful and smarter than I am. Then Prince Friedhelm replied, ‘That means she’ll be marrying Guido.’”

Duke smiled a little bit, as he could easily imagine Friedhelm saying those words and Leonhardt’s disgusted face at the joke.

“And you know what Prince Guido said after that? ‘Stop saying foolish things. Siblings cannot marry each other.’ He said that with a serious look on his face. It was a joke no matter where you look at it.”

“...Ah.”

“You can classify him under the same category as your clueless junior. I find their cluelessness annoying. No, wait. It is not his cluelessness. It is his face. It is that irritatingly beautiful face that makes everyone take him seriously. They all think that he was scorning the shallow joke when he was in fact just being a dork and did not understand the simple joke.” Leti blurted out merciless comments against *that* cold-hearted Guido. Just as expected of his half-sister.

“I wonder though. Where is the joke? He might have ulterior motives.”

“Ulterior motives?”

“Like he was trying to find out your tastes in women? Or he was trying to get some information from our side.”

“I understand. I'll be careful next time.”

*I really don't get what runs inside the heads of intelligent people.*  
Duke whispered.

The Commander of the Order, Johannes, paid a visit to Leti in the Royal Villa to report the changes in the security plan for Cornelia's birthday party. There were now more guards assigned to be on duty during the party.

“Oh, you changed the plans drastically.”

“Yes, Your Highness. We have concluded that Princess Cornelia's birthday has the highest possibility of being the next stage for the magic circle. This may be the only chance we can get the upper hand in this case.”

“I agree with you. Whatever their purposes are, it is clear that they want the circle to be discovered and cause commotion because of it. If they do it at night, the chances of it being discovered in the morning of the next day are higher. So this party that will be held at noon is supposedly the best time for them.”

Johannes came up with the same conclusion as Leti.

*Well even a girl like me was able to think of this. Certainly, the commander of the Order would have figured that out. He would have also simulated all the possible scenarios of catching the culprit with the least damage.*

Leti thanked Johannes without saying how grateful she was to have such a capable man as the Commander.

“I understand that we have limited resources, but would it also be possible to increase the guards in the Cattleya Palace? I agree that the next most likely target is the birthday party but if they are trying to outwit us, then there is a possibility that their next target is the nearly empty Cattleya Palace.”

“That is correct, Your Highness. I shall prepare men to be stationed in Cattleya Palace.”

Leti, now satisfied with the security plan, gave her consent.

The most they can do now was to have tighter security. The only thing left was for them to be able to carry out the party safely.

*Oh, there was another thing I could do in advance, but I am not the one to do it. Do your best, Duke.*

The other advanced preparation was currently ongoing in another part of the Villla and Leti could easily imagine Duke's scowling face because of it.

*The youth should learn how to face crises.* Leti whispered, putting aside her own young age.

Commander Johannes' present to Leti might be a simple gift, but it might be something else, something filled with hidden motives.

“And whatever it is, I’m the one expected to *look* after it, right?” Duke sighed upon seeing what the *present* was.

“Yes sir! I will give my best, Sir!”

The additional knight Johannes lent to Leti, as her additional guard for the party, was none other than the amazing rookie, Astrid Gale. Duke was deep in thought on how he should deal with this troublesome present from his commander.

*I do understand his reasons for doing this. Skill-wise, it'd be a total waste to just assign Astrid as a runner but giving him guarding duties is too much special treatment for an individual knight.*

The commander was truthfully a capable one. It was one of his responsibilities to assign tasks that would match each newcomer’s skills and he did it so perfectly with Astrid. However, Duke was the one bearing the responsibility of teaching everything about being a bodyguard to someone used to killing. He could easily see how much of an ordeal this training would be.

*I got your message. You transferred me to a leisure post but you won't let me have it easy now, don't you? Damn you, old man.*

The Royal Chivalric Order is composed of men coming from a wide range of social status. Some are of royal and noble descent while some are simple commoners. Therefore, as they spend years together, their manners of speaking are somehow levelled off and they become *slightly bad-mouthed*. Duke, though at the lowest rank of the nobility, was still a noble and grew up being taught the proper manners of a gentleman, but with his current predicament, ungentlemanly words were running through his mind.

Duke took a deep breath and accepted his fate.

“Alright, I’m going to teach you the protocol of protection. I’ll try to find time everyday so you’d better remember everything I teach you. Review all of it at the end of each day and make sure to remember it the next day.”

Duke has been quite busy lately with his own studies. Leti told him to memorize all details regarding Sommevesle’s social hierarchy so he had been spending

hours a day staring at the hierarchy his master gave him. Add to that the foreign languages she asked him to master as preparations for his future post as the Knight of the First Seat of the Knights of the Round. Now, he had to teach Astrid the basics and protocols of protection during his free time from his duty at the Order and a few moments before going to bed. So today, to take advantage of their day off, he asked Astrid to come to Leti's villa for a lecture.

“Listen well; there are two things you have to remember as a close protection guard. The most important thing, just as the name of the role suggests, is to stay close to the person you are guarding. The next important thing is to be able to send signals to any messenger knight within range in case you notice something strange. “

“Yes sir!”

Duke wanted Astrid to at least try these things once for practice but since they did not have any time left, Duke could only trust in Astrid's inborn instincts.

“If you happen to find someone suspicious roaming around your charge and you could not coordinate with the other knights, the first thing you have to do is to check if he has weapons on him. To do this, you have to bump into the suspect casually. But remember, don’t be too obvious and openly touch him. Be covert. The target should not suspect that you are suspecting him.”

“I should only check? Why not get the weapon?”

“Can you? Wait. That’s not the point. If you get their weapon and they notice afterwards that it is gone, they’d become more suspicious and cautious. This can make the operation harder if the targets start sending signals to other members of their party. Remember, don’t do anything reckless on your own. That’s an absolute rule.” Duke reminded Astrid strongly.

“I’ll teach you one technique to do this. Act as if you are in a hurry and bump into them. Remember to keep the focus of your eyes somewhere afar to make them think they were not really the ones you were targeting. Excuse yourself, say your apologies quickly, and then move on without even looking at their faces. “

“Bump, look afar, excuse without looking...” Astrid nodded his understanding that a simple bump was not just a simple clash of bodies but rather there was more to it.

“One last reminder. Be careful when your target is a lady. If you simply gave them the per functionary apologies when you accidentally bumped into them and carelessly touched their bodies, there are some instances when they would file a case of molestation against the knight.”

“E---h!”

“So for lady targets, put on a good smile and ask if they are fine. You can try saying, ‘Pardon me, milady. Are you hurt anywhere?’”

“Pardon me, milady. Are you hurt anywhere?” Astrid repeated and thrust the line into his head. He was willing to give all of his efforts to protect the princess he so admired.

“Ask some of the other knights to be your practice partner for the male version. Let’s practice the lady version first.”

“Yes sir!”

Astrid followed Duke’s instructions and he bumped into Duke.

“Wait! Hold on. I said *lightly* remember? Lightly. A lady would have already stumbled with that force. Again.”

Duke immediately pointed out Astrid’s mistake before Astrid could even say his apologies. He prepared again to bump his senior, this time being conscious to make the contact as light as possible. However, he found the movement of checking the presence of weapons within a moment of contact quite difficult.

*This action requires so much precision. There could only be one point of contact so I should at least already have an idea where a weapon could be hidden.*

He realized in this short span of time that what he needed was not the skill to feel up for weapons but rather observation skills to make a good guess as to where the

target could be concealing the weapon. While thinking about all of this, his fingers instinctively moved due to the habits instilled by his previous jobs.

“Ah.”

“The line.”

“Oh, right. Pardon me, milady. Are you hurt anywhere?”“

Astrid asked with a smile but his act did not pass for Duke.

“Can’t you do it better?”

“Better? How?”

“More knightly? More appealing? What I mean is that the smile should be cooler, more mature and not your childish grin. You are smiling for a lady.”

Duke’s vague advice simply confused Astrid, for right know, he only knew two types of smiles. One was his usual refreshing grin and the other was the smile-despite-the-pain kind of smile that Leti taught him. So imagining

the new 'knightly, appealing, and mature smile' was proving to be difficult for him.

Duke and Astrid were silently thinking of how to solve their predicament when their silence was broken by a loud laugh.

"*Ahahahaha!* What is this? A comedy? If it is, 'tis very entertaining. *Ahahahaha.*"

"Professor!"

The laughing person was Leonhardt who passed by the room while he was on his way to Leti's to borrow her desk since his room was already buried deep in books. He happened to witness the serious training Duke and Astrid were doing and could not hide his laughter to himself.

"*Professor?* Ah, yes. I remember her highness saying that you were teaching at the Knight Academy."

"Yes. Professor is teaching us Manners and Ethics."

"What!? Manners and Ethics? Now I see. The one teaching the proper manners and conduct to the incoming knights is His Highness. I see."



Duke thought the world might really be ending because the Academy chose to ask the worst example of manners and ethics to teach it. And before Duke could continue his comments, Leonhardt defended himself.

“I did not choose to teach the subject myself, for your information. It was purely coincidence that it was the only post available. Just think of it this way. I was able to attend the Academy, not as a student, but a teacher.”

It has been a tradition in Sommevesle for her princes to get education from the Knight Academy. However, Leonhardt's weak body did not allow him to take part in the quite physical curriculum so he decided to attend the Academy as a teacher. That showed the prowess of his brain, by being recognized as a professor at the age of fourteen.

“Anyway, Ane'ue's Sir Knight, I am afraid it is impossible and a complete waste of time to teach Astrid that way to apologise. That would only work with your extremely handsome face. There is a better way which would fit his personality better.”

“What would that be?”

“Allow me to teach my former student for free on this one. I may look like this but I am still a prince. Who do you think escorted Ane’ue to all of those balls and parties she attends? Yes, yes, yes. That would be me.”

Leti had always found rumours on who her lover was extremely annoying so she attended social gatherings only with her brother to stay clear of rumours. Now if Leonhardt misbehaved in any form and danced lously, his feet had to bear Leti’s merciless attacks so he was consciously aware to be a prince whenever he was escorting his older sister.

“Ane’ue’s Sir Knight, you shall be the target. Astrid, take a good look,” said Leonhardt as he took off his glasses.

Leonhardt bumped into Duke lightly and before Duke could say anything, he distanced himself immediately, looked at Duke, and said, “I’m sorry. Are you alright?”

Duke was rendered speechless for a moment. Leonhardt delivered the line with an upward glance, an apologetic look and a high-pitched voice of a boy yet to

have grown. It was an apology overflowing with charm that no lady would be able to say anything else other than she was all right. Duke knew Leonhardt was a handsome lad if he took off his highly reflective glasses but could not help but be surprised at how princely the Leonhardt was in front of him.

“Wow! Professor looks so cute, just like a girl!” Astrid, innocent and inexperienced about life, exclaimed the one thing Duke consciously avoided.

The comment warranted Astrid a punishment rendered personally by the offended. Leonhardt quickly took from the desk a thick tome, most likely Leti’s, and hit Astrid on the side of his head with its corner.

“If there is a man out there who would be glad to be called cute, I tell you, he is nothing but a pervert. For this kind of case, the best praise would be, ‘Just as expected of Prince Leonhardt!’ Remember that Astrid because you are kind of stupid.”

“Yes, sir...” came Astrid’s reply in reflex when replying to someone of higher status when in fact he was still in a daze due to the hard blow he received.

“You alright?” Duke asked worriedly.

“Yes...” replied Astrid as he shook his head to wake himself up.

“Ah, Senpai<sup>4</sup>, I took this from you a while ago.”

Astrid remembered that he took a sheet of paper sticking out from Duke’s pocket but before he could hand it over to his senior, Leonhardt stole it, scanned the contents and sighed.

“You truly are the epitome of a serious, boring man, aren’t you? And I was expecting something like unfinished poetry, a blackmail threat, or a sketch of your lover.”

“I am fine being a boring man, thank you.”

“Is that so? Here you go.” Leonhardt handed over the paper to Duke.

“What was written inside?” Astrid asked curiously.

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<sup>4</sup> Senpai – a Japanese honorific used in addressing one’s senior

“A table of comparison between the social hierarchy and titles of our kingdom and of other countries penned by none other than Ane’ue. I understand that it is something required for you to know as the future First Seat Knight. Getting it wrong is nothing else except for being rude. Right? *Ahahaba*”

Duke was seriously studying everything on that sheet just as Leti had ordered.

Leonhardt had already come up with the conclusion that he did not like the Duke who acts as if he is the one who understands Leti the best. But other than that part of him, Leonhardt actually likes him.

*He is quite different from what I expected him to be,* Leonhardt regrettably whispered silently in his heart.

“Ack! I have to go back to camp! Please give my regards to Her Highness!”

“Yes, yes, yes. Of course you may go.”

Astrid headed towards, not the door, but the window. He stepped onto the window frame and before Duke could stop him, he had already disappeared from the

window and a sound of nice landing was heard, leaving his senior and his professor behind.

Leonhardt peeked out of the window Astrid jumped off and whispered his amazement on Astrid's superb reflexes.

“He sure is something, isn’t he? I see you have a lot of disciplining to do. *Ahahaha*. Oh, I just remembered something I heard in the Order about him. The rumours say that everyone in the Order is spoiling him because of his skills. Is there any truth in it?”

“Spoiling?”

“Yes, like sparing him from writing the reports and writing those for him? He is not smart so if you do not let him do those things, he will stay an idiot. Why not save him from idiocy now before it becomes too late for him?”

Leonhardt was also familiar about the internal affairs of the Order just like his sister, though in a different sense. His being privy about the Order was probably

because of his position as a teacher in the Knight Academy.

Hearing this internal information from Leonhardt, it reminded Duke about a particular rumour on the intelligent prince. That he conditioned his students to be absolutely obedient to him and that even though they had graduated from the Academy, they still worked for him, like ants, bringing information to him about the Order.

“I shall let the higher-ups investigate your sources, but let me say this. I am different compared to the previous instructor. I am not spoiling Astrid in any way.”

“...I see. What do you do then?”

“I don’t spare him the reports. I make sure he passes them. Then I would mark the corrections and ask him to write it again legibly.”

Leonhardt faced Duke with an unconvinced look.

“So how exactly is that ‘not spoiling’ there? I cannot see it. I never gave him any considerations in my subject. Not even once. I gave all of his assignments an F, which is what he rightfully deserved. It was the rightful mark to

be given to an assignment written in a code that could not even be decoded by the Rosetta Stone. Oh, and by the way, all of his assignments and tests were Fs.”

“Please wait. If everything was an F then how did he pass and complete the required units to graduate from the Academy?”

“I asked him to take a supplementary exam as a final resort. I changed the format from written to oral and he passed it. I think the problem is with his abilities to express himself, his linguistic capabilities. But I doubt that can be solved since this is not his mother tongue.”

“You’re saying that we spoil him but don’t you think you are also spoiling him, Your Highness?”

The two were busy debating on who was spoiling Astrid more when Leti came into the room after she had received the report from Johannes about the changes in the security plan for Cornelia’s birthday. She already heard the heated discussion between her younger brother and her knight so she decided to call their attention, dismay evident on her face.

“What pointless thing were you arguing about enough to distress both of you? I could hear your voices from outside. I am glad to leave if you wish to continue your little debate.”

Leti was about to turn around and go out of the room when Leonhardt stopped her.

“No, no, no, Ane’ue. We are not arguing at all. In fact, we are on very good terms, aren’t we?”

“...Yes, we are on very good terms.” Duke monotonously agreed since he was a mature adult.

It was the day for the party in celebration of the birthday of Sommevesle’s Second Princess. To let her younger sister, Cornelia, shine as she was the main celebrant, Leti decided to wear a sombre lavender gown but the edges were trimmed with white lace so the dress created a charming image befitting a seventeen-year-old young lady. Her hair was tied with a nearly transparent ribbon sharing the colour of her dress and it was further decorated with little white flowers symbolizing joy for the

celebration. For the final touches, she wore a set of amethyst jewellery—a pair of earrings and a necklace, which completed her gentle ensemble of lavender and white. Leti, with all of her elegance and beauty, entered the Great Hall just like a *true princess* from a fairy tale, and this was even made more real with two knights, Duke and Astrid, following her back.

“I wish you a happy birthday, dear Cornelia. You look so wonderful.”

“Thank you Onee-sama<sup>5</sup>!” Cornelia gave Leti her heartfelt thanks, not only for wishing her a happy birthday but also for taking care of the preparations for her party in place of her late mother. She was thankful for having her older sister with her to celebrate this joyous day.

Leti smiled gently to her younger sister and whispered to her that next year would be grander since it would be her debut to adulthood.

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<sup>5</sup> Onee-sama: Onee =Older sister | Sama = formal honorific for a high person

Duke, looking at the young girl receiving greetings from different people, could not help but have mixed emotions for the young princess. This was because he heard from Leti that on Cornelia's thirteenth birthday next year, she would not only have her social debut but also the announcement of her engagement.

“An engagement at thirteen? Isn’t that too early?”

“That is what it means to be a lady in the Royal Family. Cornelia had already met her fiancé once so it is better compared to some who would be meeting the person they are marrying at the wedding ceremony itself. But more than that, I suggest you be more concerned about your studies. “

A princess’s birthday meant that nobles who normally are not present in the castle would attend. So, just as Leti planned, this would be the perfect place to test how much Duke has studied. He could leave the protection duties to Astrid for now.

“A review on Lord Aufrecht. He is a marquis under Guido’s faction and...” Leti prompted Duke to continue.

“...the father of Lady Eleanor, the fiancée of Prince Guido.” Duke continued and searched for the marquis with his eyes and found him chatting with another marquis from Guido’s side. Leti followed Duke’s eyes and checked that he was indeed looking at the right person and nodded to show that he got it correctly.

“That was easy. I expected you to know that much. Lady Eleanor is Lord Aufrecht’s daughter with his second wife. He and his first wife did not have any children. Try and search for Eleanor.”

Duke did as he was told and searched for a young lady with soft-coloured chestnut hair. He directed his eyes once again and told Leti that Eleanor was the kind-looking lady happily chatting with Guido. Leti affirmed her answer and added more information about the Aufrecht House.

“Lord Aufrecht’s first wife was actually my aunt but I did not have the chance to meet her since she died before I was born. From what I heard, she had difficulty in giving birth to their child and both she and their son, which would have been my cousin, did not make it.”

Duke nodded and tried to remember this information.

“If my cousin lived, he would have been my fiancé. Our ages were perfect you see. He would have been four years older than me.”

“So if the child was a boy, he would have been your fiancé. If the child were a girl, she would be Prince Guido’s. Looks like it was Lord Aufrecht’s destiny to be related to the Royal Family.” Duke gave this comment without realizing that he was also destined to be connected to the Royal Family based on the fact that he received invitations from Friedhelm, Guido, and Leti, the three eldest royal children, to be their knight.

“Your Highness, please accept my sincerest congratulations for your sister’s, Her Highness’, Princess Cornelia’s birthday.”

“Lord Borel, thank you.”

“The skies had been unfavourable these past few days so I was a bit worried but I was glad to see the sun shining this morning. Certainly, the Almighty is one with us in celebrating Princess Cornelia’s birthday.”

“Yes, I, too, am glad for the good weather.”

As Leti was busy chatting with the earl, Duke tried to recall information about him. The Borel family is supposedly under the Guido faction but the atmosphere between him and Leti was closer to that of allies friendly chatting rather than enemies feigning cordiality. When Borel left, Duke confirmed his thoughts with Leti.

“Lord Borel is under Guido’s faction, right?”

“I am glad you remembered. Yes, he is under Guido. But he is a firm believer of the ‘Royal Family Faith’ so he is on good terms with me as well. There is nothing wrong in having a good relationship with him.”

Leti found Duke to be confused upon hearing ‘Royal Family Faith’ so she added an explanation about it.

“The First King Christian is believed to be a son of god. Therefore, his descendants, us, the Royal Family, have inherited this sacred blood. Thus, this hobby of overly revering the royal family is called the ‘Royal Family Faith’.”

Leti consciously selected the words “hobby” and “faith” to describe this certain belief to show that she was neither a supporter nor a hater of the Royal Family Faith, and was only a curious observer.

“So, if you say ‘Royal Family’, then does this mean he is also on good terms with Prince Friedhelm?”

“Yes, he is. By lineage, he is under Guido but his stance as a person is neutral. He was a very devoted husband and was devastated with sadness when his wife died. He was able to overcome that sadness of losing his wife by clinging on to his faith in God. If the royal family had any value, then maybe that was it.”

If the believers of the Royal Family Faith revere and pray to the royal family as children of god, then it is the task of the royal family to live according to the expectations of the believers on how a royal should be. Every child of the royal family has been educated to live up to that.

“They believe that a princess should act like a princess and a prince should act like a prince. It is a reasonable demand.”

“And a queen should act like a queen?”

“Yes. I shall give Lord Borel a reign he wishes for from a queen.”

After Borel’s greetings, the line of greeters for the next queen did not grow any shorter. However, despite the unending wave of people, Leti never mistook anyone from someone else. She addressed each of them with their names and titles. After each greeting, she would share information to Duke about the lineage and recent events about each greeter.

“...To be a royal means you’ve gotta have amazing skills.”

Duke never had any difficulty with remembering people’s names and faces, but even he felt overwhelmed with the number of people giving their respects to Leti. He was now not even sure if he matched the name with the correct face. Somehow, he started dreading the review Leti would throw at him during the evening ball tonight.

“...And contrary to our expectations, nothing’s happening.”

The supposed target for the next magic circle incident, Cornelia's birthday party, ended without anything untoward happening.

The Great Hall where Cornelia's birthday party was held underwent a transformation. The prettily decorated hall by day was transformed into a grandiose ballroom for the evening's ball. The ladies swapped their conservative dresses for elegant gowns with daring cuts emphasizing more of their womanly charms. The innocent atmosphere of the hall was gone and replaced with a more matured tone, a true sign that the evening ball was a social party for the adults.

“Duke, you do not have to return until you have finished your assignment. I will be fine. Now go and talk with the incumbent Knights of the Round, knights of Seventh Heaven and Valkyrie, and the nobles on my side whom I have introduced to you during the day,” ordered Leti.

“Are you sure? There's quite a lot of people on that list.”

“Yes. Astrid will be here while you are gone. Tonight is nothing but a hurdle as you are already acquainted to all of them. Better prepare yourself now as I plan to drag you around to meet all of the nobles living in the kingdom.”

Duke nodded his understanding and exchanged looks with his junior. Astrid was able to do well and did everything that was taught to him all throughout the day so Duke thought it was safe to leave Leti to him for a while and left to complete his task.

Leti followed Duke with her eyes and once she saw him talking to one of the current Knights of the Round, she decided he would be fine and allowed her gaze to scan the area.

Since she had already finished most of the obligatory greetings during the afternoon party, all she had to do was to finish the remaining ones and she could leave as soon as it was acceptable. For now, she had to look for a place to be her sanctuary because if she stayed in the middle of the ballroom, Friedhelm would definitely get hold of her and pester her with his husband

recommendations. She kept herself alert in search for the perfect timing to run away from the crowd.

Leti, with Astrid behind her, went out to a balcony located on the second floor to catch some of the night breeze.

“Astrid, is the person you want to be your master in attendance tonight?”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“Who? I can do the introductions for you.” Leti thought of using her status as the princess to recommend Astrid if his chosen master was high in hierarchy but the young knight shook his head.

“I’m thankful for your offer but I think I should try first and give my best. If that is not enough, then I’ll just have to be better.”

“Very well then.”

Leti thought about Astrid's future, considering what she could do if his chosen master did not choose him.

*Astrid may be a commoner but his abilities and skills are enough for his name to reach Commander Johannes's ears. They might already be considering him as candidate to be the next commander, but are having second thoughts because he is not of noble descent.*

Leti had in her power to grant a random title to Astrid if his lack of it were to hinder him. It was a life she saved once, she would help him however she could.

*Now, if he could just surround himself with intelligent people...*  
Leti thought about the future as she leaned her back on the handrail of the balcony.

“Ah, Senpai, you’re back.”

“Her Highness?” Duke asked, his voice signalling he had finished his assignment.

“I am right here,” called Leti.

“I see our business for tonight is over. I did send him an invitation but I did not see him so he most likely did not come and had just sent someone else in his stead.”

Duke stood beside his master and asked her with a puzzled look, “Him? Do you mean...”

Seeing her words made her knight think of something she did not mean, she rephrased her words to clear whatever misunderstanding might be forming inside his head.

“No, not a lover, but a knight candidate. He is not included in that list I gave you before but I have already set my eyes on him. However, I should be careful about the order, timing, and the factions to be successful in getting him. Until then, all I can do is prepare an act on how I can sell the position of being a Knight of the Round at a higher price.”

A great-great-great...uncle once told Leti that men are weak against dramatic productions so Leti thought of taking advantage of that male psychology to bring her next target down to his knees with her tears.

“To complete my ideal Knights of the Round, there are people I need to be there no matter what. They may even be harder to get than you were. Especially this one I am planning to be by my fourth or fifth knight. I might even need the whole kingdom to bring him down. In fact, I have already asked Leon to find anything I can use for it.”

“He is quite a big fish then, for you to be thinking of ways to blackmail him this early.”

Leti did not seem to have any plans on simply persuading her next target. She would not accept “no” for an answer and to do that, she might even need the kingdom as her back up. This was proof enough that this man, whoever he might be, was not just an ordinary person.

“I am quite looking forward to how the pleasure of bringing a man down to his feet would fe...” Leti’s words were cut short and she set her gaze at something.

Duke looked towards the direction Leti was looking but he could not see anything wrong.

“...I can see clearly in the dark, how about you?” Leti asked Duke, still staring at the same direction.

“I don’t know how clearly *your* clearly is but I’m normal.”

“Then can you see the figure drawn on the floor of the balcony over there. There is also something at its centre.”

Duke squinted his eyes to shape out whatever Leti was describing. He was at least able to see that there was indeed something on the floor of the other balcony but he could not see the drawing she described.

“Astrid, come here,” called Duke.

Astrid was standing on guard by the entrance of the balcony and walked immediately towards Duke upon hearing his call. Duke then asked him to look at the same balcony and tell them what he saw.

“Hmmm...An animal? And yes, there seems to be something drawn on the floor as well.”

“So it was not my imagination then. That, I think, is our third magic circle and the offering this time looks like a dog.”

“Are you sure!?”

Leti squinted her eyes and nodded at Duke’s question.

“Is there any chance we have missed this during the day?” Duke suspected this was an oversight but Leti thought otherwise.

“The balconies were decorated with flowers during Cornelia’s party. If this was already drawn during that time, someone would have discovered this when the flowers were cleared in preparation for the evening ball.”  
*But why?*

The evening ball was a separate occasion and was in no way connected to Cornelia’s party since she had yet to make her debut. Therefore, if the target was truly the “Royal Family”, a princess’ birthday party was the more logical target since it was in celebration for a ‘royal child’ and not this regular social event.

“They might have changed their plans because of the increased security during the day. But still...” Leti could not even make a guess on what the reason behind this act was and the only way to know it was to catch the perpetrators and ask them directly.

“Anyway, the first course of action is to report this. Astrid, go immediately to Commander Johannes.”

Protocol would require Duke and Astrid to report this immediately to their commander. The knights of the Order would then call off the ball and arrange a facilitated evacuation where each knight would stand guard at all the exits of the Great Hall. They would look like they were guarding the guests when in fact they were already searching who among them would have traces of blood on them, which could make them the primary suspects.

Leti would have ordered the two knights with her to follow the protocol, but, “Leave the report for later. The perpetrators were able to draw the circle right under the nose of the Order. I highly doubt that they would be so careless to leave traces of blood on their clothes. We will not be able to catch them if we simply go by the book.”

The criminal or criminals made their every move with extreme caution that not even a clue as to who they were was left in any of the sites of the magic circle incident. Such a criminal would have easily prepared a change of clothes in case they were dirtied with blood.

“It was a good thing I was the one who discovered this first. I have a plan that could forestall theirs. Astrid, go back to the first floor and shout that you have found the magic circle. But you will not point towards the balcony but rather towards the gardens in the opposite direction.”

“Eh? I will tell a lie?”

“Not a complete lie. At least draw something that would look like one and then draw the attention of the people towards that direction. Duke, you shall stay with me to observe what would be the reactions of the guests when they hear Astrid.”

“So the person who would look towards the balcony where the real circle is when Astrid shouts is our prime suspect,” confirmed Duke.

Leti nodded and reaffirmed their plan. “Yes. The normal reaction to Astrid’s announcement will be to follow where he was pointing since they know nothing about it. If there is anyone facing elsewhere, then that will make him or her a suspect. We only have one moment for this.”

Duke could remember in an instant who was standing where. Once he found the odd balls, Leti could easily identify them since she knew everyone in attendance.

“Astrid, take this with you. It will be too unnatural for you to find the magic circle when you are not with me, the person you are supposedly guarding. If anyone asked, tell them I dropped my earring and I ordered you to search for it,” Leti explained as she took off one of her earrings and gave it to Astrid.

“Ain’t that a familiar excuse? How many times have you used that again?”

“What are you saying? I just thought of it now.” Leti smoothly shrugged off Duke’s questioning look and gave her signal to commence their plan.

After he had finished the preparations, Astrid slightly opened one of the doors leading inside the Great Hall to peek inside. He looked at Leti and Duke who were standing atop a stairwell to observe the guests. He sent them a signal that he was ready and closed the door once again. He counted to ten and pushed the door wide open and shouted with a rattled expression, “Oh no! Everyone! I found a cursed magic circle!”

“The cursed circle!”

“The third one!?”

The Great Hall buzzed in an instant. All of the guests present at the birthday party were aware about the recent magic circle incidents and it was the latest topic of conversation among them. Now that the said circle had made an appearance at this moment, everyone was either surprised or curious, except, of course, the suspects who did not face towards Astrid’s direction.

“I got three!” Duke instantly identified their probable suspects and described where they were to Leti.

“The first one is on your left. The man wearing the green coat standing near the third pillar. He reacted late to Astrid’s announcement despite being near the door.”

“Lord Dumeier. The old baron has poor hearing so his late reaction is nothing unnatural.”

“The other one is the lady wearing a dress with gold trimmings. She is standing over there near the goddess statue. She did not even turn to give Astrid a look.”

“The Countess Fach. She is a meek lady and is easily frightened by things like this. I think it is safe to say she was so scared when she heard about the discovery of the circle and could not even move.”

Leti provided the identities, details, and possible explanations for the actions of each of the suspect. For the first two, Duke decided they were clean based on Leti’s words.

“The last man is someone I also know. Lord Borel. Only he, out of the three, faced towards the direction of the balcony. He is standing over there, second pillar from here, on our right side.”

Leti followed Duke's direction and saw the earl standing there, his expression, however, was already mirroring the surprised reaction of the other guests.

“Lord Borel...” Leti did not expect him to be involved in this. Borel was a royal family fanatic and he would not fit in her initial theory about the royal family being the target of the curse. He would not want to curse the object of his veneration.

“He was also present during the tournament. His knight was a participant and he was there as a spectator. Considering his background, he might've been ordered by someone to do this, since I doubt he'd do this out of his own accord. And the only ones who could give the order are...”

The Borel House was under Guido's faction. The only people that could have given the orders were Guido or the family behind him, the Eulenbergs.

“So what now?”

Duke's question was not asking Leti what she would do now, but rather what she would do about this incident.

Would she leave this to the Order or would she keep on investigating to find the truth? He was worried that if she chooses to continue on, she might uncover a truth that he would not want her to; the truth that her brother Guido wanted to curse the entire royal family, including his own mother.

“The act of ‘not knowing’ and ‘knowing but acting otherwise’ looks the same to others but they have different meanings for the actor. I would always choose the latter no matter what the result might be. Besides, it is not certain that my brother is behind this. There is a possibility that the Eulenbergs are. If that will be the case, then it is a good thing for me.”

Leti wanted materials she could use for threats or blackmail when she ascends the throne, more so if it was something like this, a failure by one of the families of the Three Grand Marquises of Sommevesle.

“Anyway, the first thing I have to do is to talk privately with Prince Guido. If I feign sickness, I am certain he would allow me to use one of the empty rooms.

We could talk privately there. Duke, I would need you to support my story.”

Leti shared with Duke the perfectly consistent story she came up. It went like this.

The magic circle Astrid found at the garden was a draft of the magic circle. Leti was the one who found the true circles drawn at one of the balconies on the second floor. She felt sick upon seeing the bloody dog corpse used as the offering.

Duke went to his commander to give his report containing ‘nothing but the truth’ and left the investigation to the hands of the Order. After finishing this, he searched for Guido to inform him about Leti’s *condition*.

“Prince Guido, Her Highness does not seem to be well. She did not want to cause a scene and asked if you could lend a room for her to rest.”

Guido immediately nodded to Duke’s request and went to Leti. He even lent his arm to his sister for

support and escorted them by himself towards a room located at a quiet corridor.

Duke could not help but admire how marvellous of a strategist his master was. Everything went smoothly and exactly as she said. It was a waste she was a woman. The Order could definitely find a use for her superb brain.

“I'll go and fetch some water. Your Highness, would it be alright to leave Her Highness with you for a while?”

Guido silently nodded. Duke left them after giving Astrid a reminder in front of everyone.

“Astrid, stand on guard outside by the door. Remember, you should not enter a room where a lady is taking her rest even if you are her guard. Understood?”

“Yes sir!”

Duke's reminder served both as an order to his overly eager junior and as a warning to Guido's Valkyrie to prevent them from entering the room so that Leti could have her private talk with Guido.

The room Guido escorted Leti was one of the rooms prepared beforehand in case some guests felt ill or tired during the ball. However, instead of letting her rest on a couch near the door and easily visible outside, he led her to the inner room, thinking she would be able to rest better there.

“Leticia, are you truly alright?”

“Yes, thank you. I just feel a little nauseated.”

Leti replied, feeling a little guilty when she heard worry from Guido’s voice. She continued acting sick and lay down on the couch but still kept her eyes open. The room was dimly lit and Guido, standing beside her, stared at her.

“—Leticia.”

Guido’s voice sounded different. His tone was lower than usual.

“Prince Guido...? I have something to ask you.” Leti slowly got up from laying down but Guido stopped her and held her shoulders. She could not even remember when they have looked at each other’s face so closely.

The room was dark, but Leti, with her night eyes clearly saw Guido's expression.

“We look so similar, don't we?”

“What would you expect? You are my brother and I am your sister. It is natural for us to resemble each other.”

Slowly, the beautiful face inched closer and closer and Leti felt something different from her brother. At that moment, Leti did not feel he was her brother, but a man. She grabbed Guido's arm to stop him and create some distance between them. Nevertheless, Guido tightened his grip on her shoulders, as if in answer to her resistance.

*What is he doing?*

Had Guido not been her brother, Leti would have either kicked him already or screamed at the top of her lungs. However, she could not physically overpower him to get him off her.

Leti's sight was filled with nothing but steel-blue eyes framed by golden hair that were so similar to her own. Their gazes locked on each other and her mind was swirling with confusion.

“W...Why?” Leti whispered with a hoarse voice, soft but still loud enough to reach Guido’s ears. However, he was not moved and kept on closing in their distance, with strands of his golden mane caressing Leti’s cheeks.

*WHY...NO...STOP! THIS SHOULD NOT BE!*

“Onii-sama<sup>6</sup>! Stop this!”

“What the hell are you doing!!!”

Friedhelm entered the room at the same time Leti screamed.

The scene that welcomed him was a dark room, his younger brother pinning down his younger sister, who was catching her breath.

Anyone who saw the scene could easily imagine what was happening.

“Guido! Get off her! Leti is your sister! What were you thinking?”

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<sup>6</sup> Onii-sama: Onii =Older Brother | Sama = formal honorific for a high person

Guido slowly stood up and uttered not a word.

“Why won’t you answer?...Still nothing? Then answer with this!”

Friedhelm took two swords hanging on the wall and threw the other one to Guido. Guido caught it effortlessly.

“This ain’t gonna cut you, but is damn strong enough to break your bones. Leti, I’ll have you decide who’s better between the two us right here, right now!” Friedhelm raged. He did not even bother to hide his contempt for his brother.

Friedhelm drew his sword and threw its sheath. He was serious. Guido caught onto his meaning and followed suit.

“W...wait! Stop this nonsense!”

The two princes were serious. If this went on, they would not just end with grave wounds. Leti could already see the imminent future fast approaching. She wished for someone to come and help. She thought of her knight.

“Please stop this!”

As if Leti’s scream was their signal, the two princes launched at each other and a metallic clash echoed across the room. Leti unconsciously closed her eyes, fearing that the unpleasant future she thought of would materialize in front of her eyes. Then a voice spoke. It belonged to neither of her brothers.

“...Senpai taught me it is rude to cause a ruckus inside a room where a lady is resting.”

In between Friedhelm and Guido was a red-haired, green-eyed young knight. He blocked Friedhelm’s sword with his own and Guido’s with his knife. This young lad had just prevented a national disaster from happening.

“You watchdog! Get your nosy ass off here or I’ll cut your throat!”

“...Please, go ahead.”

Astrid was short so he was looking up to Friedhelm. But his piercing green eyes were as if he was looking down on the tall prince, threatening him, *Try if you dare ‘cause there’s no way you could.*

Seeing the worst had past, Leti appealed to Guido, “Please, Guido Onii-sama! This is all just a misunderstanding, right? Please, withdraw your sword.”

Leti wanted to ask Guido a multitude of questions but decided it was best to first solve this case at hand. She had to keep the situation in control.

“Your Highnesses, please slowly put your swords down and withdraw,” Astrid prompted the two princes to retreat.

“Guido should go first.”

Friedhelm already withdrew his sword but had yet to put it down, glaring at his brother.

Guido, without uttering a word, picked up the sheath of his sword, and closed it. He threw the sheathed sword to Astrid and went out of the room.

“Oi, Leticia, is this really a misunderstanding?”

“Yes. I was taking a break from the ball and Prince Guido was only checking on me. Please, believe that for now.”

Friedhelm did not say anything else and left the room. He chose to believe his sister's words for this incident, but that did not mean his anger had dissipated and the heavy wooden door had to bear the brunt of it.

When her brothers left and the room regained its silence, Leti's strength left her knees and she fell down on the couch.

“Your Highness! Are you alright?”

“Just surprised...Thank you for stopping them. If not for you blood might have been...”

“Uhm...Your Highness, please forgive me for letting Prince Friedhelm inside. He said he was worried you were going to have a secret meeting with Prince Guido so he had to stop it at all costs. I thought it was alright since he was family.”

“No, don't be sorry. If Prince Friedhelm did not come...” *who knows what would have happened.*

Although it would most likely end as an attempt since Leti would have summoned the Knight Sword and

rendered Guido unconscious. Leti let out a deep, deep, deep sigh.

Astrid was kneeling in front of her when he felt something strange with Leti. Upon further observation, he felt the same impurity during the day of the tournament. He gathered up his courage to speak about it.

“Your Highness, may I ask you something?”

“If that is about Prince Guido, do not even bother. Even I do not know the answers.”

“Ah, no, this might be something different, but I’m not sure. I think that because of the Sword of White Light Your Highness granted me, I am now able to sense impurities around me. I sensed some before on your hair that was stained by the bird’s blood during the first magic circle incident.”

Leti remembered that day well since that was when she kicked Astrid out of her room and called him a mongrel. Now, she understood that he was trying to sniff out the impurities - or the black scent as he called it then.

“I can also sense it again around your arms and shoulders. Didn’t Prince Guido touched you on those parts?”

Leti spoke nothing but her silence meant affirmation to his question. Guido indeed grabbed her on the shoulders.

The impurity from the blood from the magic circle and the impurity from Guido’s touch were the same.

“...Maybe, maybe His Highness is related to this incident,” Astrid stated his hypothesis calmly.

Leti wanted to deny Astrid’s hypothesis, but there were far too many pieces fitting if Guido indeed played a role in this situation.

One, she met him at the site of the first circle a few nights ago.

Two, he was uncharacteristically persistent in chasing after information about this case and kept on asking about the progress from Leonhardt and Commander Johannes.

Lastly, Borel, the only one who knew where the third circle is, was under his faction.

Leti's head was swirling between understanding and disbelief.

“Give me your orders and I shall investigate on this case, Your Highness.”

Astrid did have the Sword of White Light and it holds the ability to counter curses. Add to that his abilities and skills acquired from being a former assassin, and he was the best man to do this investigation.

“I see. But even if you have the Sword, you are not my knight and I cannot order you to do things on my behalf. Thank you for the information but I will take care of this now.”

Leti did save Astrid, but she did not want him to feel indebted to her. He was just a hired temporary knight; she did not plan to use him more than that.

“Then, please let me return this to you. This is effective against curses, and, there's the matter with

Prince Guido. Please take the Purifying Sword and use it for your protection,” pleaded Astrid.

“Astrid, the Sword would already be useless even if you return it to me. It is already your power and I can no longer use it.”

A knight’s investiture done in the name of the Knight King meant that the Knight King is *dividing* his powers to his knight. Whenever he grants a Sword of Promise to his knight, his power is lessened.

Leti was aware of this fact so she initially did not have any plans on granting any of the Swords. Even the brave and strong Lion King Alexander and the One-armed King Oswald living in a time of war did not let go all of the Swords of Promise.

“No way...” Astrid was dumbfounded upon learning the true meaning behind the Sword and what Leti did for him.

Leti placed her hand on Astrid’s shoulder to stop him from blaming himself.

“Astrid, we humans are weak. There will always be times when we have to cling onto something to keep standing. For some it is God, for others it is their master, king, or lovers. It can be anyone or anything.”

Lord Aufrecht lost his wife and son but he continued on to love his second wife and their child and found happiness with them. Lord Borel also lost his wife but found solace in his faith in God and in the kingdom.

“As for me, I hold on to the fact that I am a reincarnation of the Knight King. It is because of that fact that I was able to accept my fate as the next queen and do whatever I could to prepare for it. As for you, you can make it as the Sword of White Light. It can be your centre, your source of strength. Use its light as your guide whenever you feel like darkness is swallowing you up. That is the reason I gave you that sword.”

Leti's gentle voice echoed in Astrid's heart. He looked up and faced the princess with determined eyes. “I will, Your Highness,” his voice was soft, yet strong.

Satisfied with his answer, Leti let go of Astrid's shoulders and dismissed him.

“I am a bit tired. I shall rest here for a while. Stay on guard by the door and inform me when Duke returns.”

“Shall I light up some more candles?”

“No, this is just perfect to do some thinking.”

Astrid stood up and closed the door of the inner room.

Leti reclined on the couch, closed her eyes and recalled the events of the day. Too many things had happened that she wanted to shout.

Guido made an attempt on her. Her two brothers nearly killed each other. Guido might be the one drawing the circles.

“Guido Onii-sama, if you truly are the one behind this, then who are you cursing?” Leti whispered into the dark.